

THE WRONG KIND OF GENERAL: THE RESIGNATION OF UNION BRIGADIER

GENERAL WILLIAM W. BURNS

A Thesis

by

DAVID EARL WARD

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2005

Major Subject: History

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ABSTRACT

The Wrong Kind of General: The Resignation of Union Brigadier

General William W. Burns. (May 2005)

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This study examines the career of Union Brigadier General William Wallace Burns, focusing on the circumstances surrounding his mysterious resignation of his volunteer rank in March 1863, at the height of the Civil War. General Burns, a rising star in the Army of the Potomac, seemingly assured of rapid promotion to major general, relinquished his field rank and returned to his Regular Army rank of major in the Commissary Department. Why would a well-regarded officer, not suffering from any debilitating physical problems, choose to destroy his career in such a manner? General Burns claimed in his personal letters that he was forced out through the duplicity of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton. A War Department inquiry found no evidence to support Burns' allegation. This thesis, after a thorough examination of the subject, offers a conclusion as to whether General Burns was wronged or if he was the victim of his own paranoia.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Brigadier General William Wallace Burns needed more time. He did not have the troops he needed to hold the ground he was on, yet his orders required him to make the attempt. Major General George B. McClellan's grand plan to take Richmond in the summer of 1862 with his Peninsular campaign had crumbled in the face of ferocious Confederate attacks, and the Army of the Potomac was now conducting a fighting withdrawal to safer ground. Failure to check the Confederate advance here at Savage Station, at least temporarily, would further expose the vulnerable rear of the retreating Union army, a potentially disastrous development. His three regiments were horribly exposed, his flanks up in the air and a dangerous gap in his center. The regiments on either side of the gap were from his own Philadelphia Brigade, a unit that had suffered a costly defeat that ended in an embarrassing rout only a few months before. This action would be their first real test since that day. Burns could only hope that months of training under his watchful eye would pay off. He nervously eyed the gap, praying that his promised reinforcements would arrive before the Confederates did. A rattle of musketry in the woods in front of his line announced the winner of the race. Blue-clad skirmishers sprinted from the woods, followed closely by hundreds of yelling rebels, pushing right towards the gap. Burns exhorted his men to hold, pacing behind the line even after a Confederate bullet tore open his cheek, coming within inches of killing him

This thesis follows the style and format of *Civil War History*.

on the spot. As he feared, his troops could not hold the line, but they gave ground only grudgingly, maintaining order even as they fell back under fire. In the end, Burns and his men bought just enough time for fresh Union troops to arrive and drive back the Confederates.¹

War can reveal talent in warriors in a wholly unbiased manner, regardless of their background before the fighting starts. Burns began the Civil War as a well-regarded officer in the Commissary Department, with neither combat experience nor demonstrated skill in leading large numbers of soldiers even in peacetime exercises, yet he requested a combat command early in the war and proved to be highly capable leading both a brigade and a division in the field. His defense of Savage Station was the culmination of his learning experience as a combat leader, having taken the remnants of a shattered brigade and forging them into a well-disciplined fighting force that proved their mettle under dire circumstances in a crucial situation. However, rather than heralding the arrival of a new star in the Union army, the battle proved to be the high-water mark of a combat career cut short with no explanation after Burns submitted his resignation as a volunteer officer in March 1863 and returned to the Commissary Department.

Burns' decision has provoked little curiosity from historians. Ezra Warner devotes less than a page to Burns' entry in his *Generals in Blue*, dismissively noting that "Burns evidently preferred administration to field command."² The entry in the *Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War* paraphrases Warner with the conclusion that "field command was not his preference."³ In *Who Was Who in the Civil*

War, Stewart Sifakis decides not to even guess, noting the resignation without comment. A darker potential explanation arises in Allen C. Guelzo's entry on Burns in the *Biographical Dictionary of the Union*, where he surmises that the general "refused to report to General William S. Rosecrans," a theory that casts a negative light on Burns.⁴ None of these historians appear to consider the possibility that there were extenuating circumstances involved in Burns' resignation.⁵

Even those historians who take note of Burns' accomplishments on the battlefield during the Peninsular Campaign show little curiosity about his sudden disappearance from the Army of the Potomac only months later. Bradley M. Gottfried paints a highly complimentary, if brief, picture of Burns in *Stopping Pickett: The History of the Philadelphia Brigade*, then allows him to vanish from the scene, noting without explanation that "Burns never received a second star."⁶ Gary G. Lash writes favorably of Burns in his massive history of the California regiment, but he cannot provide any clues as to why the general sank into obscurity instead of going on to greater things.⁷ Other historians who mention Burns at all, such as Brian K. Burton in *Extraordinary Circumstances: The Seven Days Battles*, praise him for his conduct at Savage Station and then rarely, if ever, mention him again.⁸

As Burns' papers now reveal⁹, the events that provoked his resignation were far more complicated than previously suspected. He was convinced that political enemies were conspiring to keep him from promotion, in particular Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton. Burns resigned in protest, not to escape what he perceived as persecution but to bring the matter to Abraham Lincoln's attention, hoping for intervention. This thesis

will examine the events surrounding Burns' sudden resignation for the first time, using his papers to paint the picture as he saw it and then evaluating if his version of events is correct. In doing so, this thesis will provide the first study of this talented general's career of more than a few paragraphs.

Burns considered Stanton to be his archenemy. Therefore this thesis will examine the rift that existed between Stanton and a sizable number of conservative, West Point-educated officers in the Army of the Potomac, many of whom were friends and protégés of Major General George B. McClellan, placing it in the context of the political disagreements between the army and the government on how best to prosecute the war. This environment caused officers such as Burns to become keenly aware of what they perceived to be political threats from above, creating a situation where malice could be seen in every shadow, whether it was there or not. By presenting many of the factors that influenced his decision, a decision that cost the Union the services of a valuable combat leader at a critical point in the war, this thesis will provide the first informed explanation for the mysterious resignation of General Burns.

Endnotes

¹ Gary G. Lash, “Duty Well Done”: *The History of Edward Baker’s California Regiment (71st Pennsylvania Infantry)* (Baltimore: Butternut and Blue, 2001), 115-124. Report of Brig. Gen. William W. Burns, July 5, 1862, Q. R., Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 90-91.

² Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 56.

³ Patricia Faust, ed., *Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War* (New York: Harper, 1986), 96.

⁴ Allen C. Guelzo, “William Wallace Burns,” in John T. Hubbell and James W. Geary, eds., *Biographical Dictionary of the Union* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995), 74.

⁵ Stewart Sifakis, *Who Was Who in the Civil War* (New York: Facts of File, 1988), 22-23.

⁶ Bradley M. Gottfried, Stopping Pickett: The History of the Philadelphia Brigade (Shippensburg, Penn.: White Mane Books, 1999), 99.

⁷ Gary G. Lash, “Duty Well Done”, 146.

⁸ Brian K. Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances: The Seven Days Battles* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 223.

⁹ William Wallace Burns Papers, Cushing Memorial Library, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas (hereafter Burns Papers, TAMU).

CHAPTER II

THE LONG ROAD UP

William Wallace Burns, one of nine children for Joseph and Rebecca Lewis Burns, was born in Coshocton, Ohio, the county seat of rural Coshocton County, northeast of Columbus, on September 3, 1825. Through his mother, a native Virginian, young William was a distant relation to George Washington. Joseph Burns, also born in Virginia, moved to Ohio with his parents as a teenager and became a prominent local politician, serving in the state legislature from 1838 to 1840 and winning a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives as a Democrat in 1857. The elder Burns also had a strong interest in military affairs and served as a major general in command of the Ohio state militia prior to his election to the House of Representatives. His father's political and military connections were surely influential in securing young William an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, in May 1842.¹

Burns entered as part of the largest class the academy had ever seen; one-hundred twenty-two applicants arrived on the banks of the Hudson River that summer. Pressure began immediately, with thirty-three young men packing for home by summer's end. The West Point regimen instilled in Burns a sense of discipline that would become a hallmark of his military career. Cadets rose each day at dawn and fell in immediately for roll call; inspection followed thirty minutes later. Breakfast was served at 7:00 a.m. and classes began at 8:00 a.m., held in sequence for five hours until an hour break for lunch at 1:00 p.m., followed by two more hours of classes. Various forms of drill occupied the cadets from 4:00 p.m. to sundown at which point supper was served for an hour. Study

was required until 9:30 p.m. when cadets had a half-hour of time to themselves before lights out at 10:00 p.m.²

Burns adapted well to West Point's regimentation. His strong discipline earned him the right to carry the colors during the academy's Independence Day celebration in 1846. For the rest of his life he would emphasize the importance of discipline for a soldier. In a General Order (dated November 3, 1862) announcing that he was leaving his brigade in order to take up a division command, Burns implored his men "to pay rigid regard to discipline," further emphasizing that "without discipline the bravest must yield to the basest. General Washington wept tears of blood over this great want in his army . . . I beg you to remember me in your determination to do your duty . . ."³ He later explained his views on the subject of discipline in great detail:

The patriot who rushes to the field in defence of his country follows the blind impulse of an honorable instinct, but the man who, in addition, subjects himself to the restraints of discipline, endures hardships and suffering in the thousand of vicissitudes which a military life in camp and in field inflicts upon an universal soldier, passes through the chrysalis state of manhood into the veteran defender of his country and her rights. When this soldier perseveres with a single eye to duty, resisting alike the disloyalty and weakness of his superiors, while combating the open blows of his country's foes, he becomes a 'hero.'⁴

Burns never abandoned the devotion to discipline instilled in him through his West Point instruction, always striving to inspire the troops under his command to the same devotion.⁵

Burns failed English during his first year at West Point and was required to repeat the year, thus extending his time at the academy to five years and forfeiting his chance to graduate alongside future luminaries such as George B. McClellan, Thomas J. Jackson, George Pickett, Samuel D. Sturgis, and George Stoneman in the famous class of 1846. Burns graduated on July 1, 1847, ranked, inauspiciously, twenty-eighth in a class of thirty-eight, including A. P. Hill, Ambrose Burnside, John Gibbon, and Henry Heth.⁶

Young Burns began his military career as a brevet second lieutenant in the U.S. 3rd Infantry Regiment in August 1847, before being promoted to second lieutenant with the 5th Infantry that September, under the command of Captain Caleb C. Sibley. After marching from Vera Cruz to Mexico City with many of his recently graduated classmates, Burns was selected to serve in the military police force created for the enemy capital after its fall and guarded state prisoners being held in the Palace of the Montezumas. With the war ended, Burns found himself spending the next five years (1849-54) on garrison duty at various posts in Mississippi, Arkansas, Texas, and Indian Territory; a promotion to first lieutenant in the 5th Infantry came in 1851. On September 3, 1849, while at Fort Smith, Arkansas, Burns married a daughter of John C. Atkinson, of Lexington, Kentucky, with whom he would have two daughters of his own.⁷

Burns first met Henry Hopkins Sibley, a distant relative of his previous commander, while stationed at Fort Graham, Texas (near Waco) with the 5th Infantry. Brevet Major Sibley was posted there as Burns' commanding officer in 1850, an event that would in time prove fortuitous for the young lieutenant. Sibley and Burns became

fast friends. Sibley helped found and became president of a literary club called the Brazorian Society, an association of officers serving near the Brazos River who met periodically to present speakers and read papers. Burns, who would prove fond of intellectual and literary endeavors throughout his lifetime, was almost certainly a member.⁸

His service on the frontier concluded, Burns was assigned to Philadelphia on recruiting duty for the next two years (1854-56). Evidently Burns did not find the intellectual aspects of this duty to be very stimulating; he occupied his spare time attending medical lectures and helping publish an edition of William Hardee's manual on infantry tactics.⁹

In late 1855 Burns was petitioned by Brevet Major Sibley for assistance in procuring a patent for a new tent design: the Sibley tent. Impressed by the warmth, sturdiness, and roominess of a Comanche teepee during a visit to an Indian village in early 1855, Sibley and his fellow officers (some of whom were members of the Brazorian Society) had taken the obvious advantages of the Indian shelter and drawn up an efficient, simple conical design for use as a new Army tent. An assignment to help quell the disturbances in "Bleeding Kansas" during the winter of 1855-56 gave Sibley the opportunity for an extensive field test for his tent; it proved to work as well as he could have hoped, keeping his men warm in the coldest weather and holding up against the strongest winds. Wanting to secure a patent for the design before selling his invention to the Army, Sibley remembered Lieutenant Burns in Philadelphia and requested his assistance.¹⁰

By spring 1856, according to historian Jerry Thompson, “Lieutenant Burns had arranged for the models, drawings, and the technical details necessary for the awarding of the patent”: Sibley got his patent on April 22, 1856.¹¹ Burns also ordered the manufacture of twenty-five of the tents and had them shipped out west for sale at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. In return for his service, Sibley agreed for Burns to receive half of the royalties produced by sales of the tent, but according to Thompson, it was “a decision [Sibley] would later regret.”¹² Burns, a stickler for details, requested for this arrangement to be put in writing, a request Sibley declined to fulfill, preferring a gentleman’s agreement in lieu of an official contract. Unlike Sibley, denied royalties because he sided with the Confederacy, Burns would never have cause to regret this business deal, profiting from it greatly after the war.¹³

His stint in Philadelphia complete, Burns was transferred to Florida for the duration of the Third Seminole War (1856-1857). He was appointed regimental Quartermaster of the 5th Infantry at Fort Myers in November 1856.¹⁴ This was the beginning of Burns’ long career in the Commissary Department, a period interrupted only by his brief experience as a combat officer during the Civil War. Burns was made for commissary duty; his attention to detail and rigid sense of discipline were well-suited to the job, making for a steady rise up the ranks.

Service in Florida was a miserable fate, time spent wading through swamps, swatting at mosquitoes, and trying to avoid dysentery and malaria. Nevertheless, Burns found time to make friends. Future Union general Oliver O. Howard remembered, “Burns, though he had never seen me before, extended to me his hospitality.”¹⁵ Burns,

Howard, and other similarly inclined officers often found relief from the oppressive conditions in religion; it is not clear if Burns was a deeply religious man before his Seminole duty, he certainly was after it.

Moving from one climatic extreme to another, Burns found himself (along with the rest of the 5th Infantry) transferred to Fort Leavenworth in the summer of 1857. Inspired by a religious revival the year before, Mormon unrest had driven federal authorities out of the Utah Territory. The year had already seen considerable public turmoil over the issue of slavery, and President James Buchanan was determined not to allow another source of unrest to fester. A chance to divert attention from the divisive slavery issue and the potential threat to the California-Oregon Trail were also probable factors in his decision. In May he ordered an expedition by the army to occupy Mormon centers in the Great Salt Lake Valley in Utah. Burns and the 5th Infantry were part of a five-hundred man expedition that left Fort Leavenworth in mid-July.¹⁶

Having started too late in the year to avoid the beginning of winter in the mountains during their march to Utah, Burns and his comrades found themselves trudging through increasingly difficult weather as the days dragged on. Confusion over who was to command the expedition had forced the troops to begin their march with Colonel Edmund B. Alexander as an interim commander. Knowing that a new commander would eventually be coming to take responsibility for the campaign, Alexander chose to mill about the northern edge of the Utah Territory and accomplish nothing except to get his men caught in an October blizzard and expose his supply train to harassment by Mormon rangers. One can only imagine how difficult the conditions

must have made Burns' job as regimental quartermaster. When Colonel Albert S. Johnston arrived in November to take command of the expedition he immediately put the men into winter quarters at Fort Bridger.¹⁷

The onset of winter gave the Mormons the opportunity to make peace with President Buchanan. Forced to wait first for good weather and then for the arrival of reinforcements and supplies from Fort Leavenworth, the expedition was unable to get moving until mid-June, just in time to hear news of a negotiated settlement between the Mormons and the Federal government. With no rebellion left to quell, Johnston and his men had nothing to do but establish a new army post in the Utah Territory. This accomplished, Johnston began issuing leave to some officers, but not Burns; the lieutenant was prompted by his disappointment to write a letter of complaint to Johnston's adjutant, Major Fitz-John Porter.¹⁸

Perhaps Burns was mollified by his appointment to Johnston's staff as chief commissary of subsistence and his attendant promotion to captain on November 3, 1858. Mollified or not, Burns' career was on the ascent. His devotion to the army and his sense of discipline attracted enough attention that Burns, out of three regimental quartermasters involved in the Mormon Expedition, was chosen to be chief of commissary. George B. McClellan described the position as "difficult and of the greatest importance . . . upon its proper performance the success of the army depends."¹⁹ This appointment was the first in a string of similar appointments with increasing responsibilities for Burns throughout his army career; he would eventually retire as a colonel in the commissary department.

With tensions reduced to a tolerable level in Utah, Burns found his services needed in Indian Territory (modern Oklahoma). Burns supervised subsistence affairs in Indian Territory from 1859-60. Stationed at Fort Smith, Arkansas, just over the border from Indian Territory, Burns found himself in a vulnerable position as tensions increased to the boiling point between North and South. Inflamed by debates over the issues of the morality of human bondage and the power of the states in relation to that of the Federal government, slave-holding Southerners viewed the upcoming presidential election of 1860 as a referendum on the desirability of remaining part of the Union. With no one party effectively represented in both North and South, the election turned into an awkward four-sided contest, giving the electoral victory to Republican Abraham Lincoln. Elected by a plurality based mostly in Northern, free states, Lincoln had run on an anti-slavery, pro-tariff platform that outraged pro-slavery, states' rights Southerners, causing the region, in the words of one historian, to "[fall] into a hysterical state."²⁰ A wave of enthusiasm for the idea of seceding from the Union swept across the Deep South.

Burns, a Democrat, was not happy with the results of the election. The Democratic party split into two camps during the campaign of 1860, with Northern Democrats supporting the candidacy of Stephen A. Douglas and Southern Democrats that of John C. Breckinridge; the two candidates differed on the issue of Federal protection of slavery with Douglas opposing and Breckinridge in favor. Burns was a rarity, a Northerner who "advocated the [position] of the south as presented in the platform of Breckinridge."²¹ The Ohioan was predisposed to be sympathetic to the

Southern viewpoint, explaining that “my father [a native Virginian] always politically and personally stood by the interest of the south.”²² In addition, with the exception of his two-year stint in Philadelphia, Burns spent most of his pre-war army career in the South and Southwest. He married into a Kentucky family and he had friends in Texas, Florida and Arkansas who undoubtedly influenced the political views of the already conservative officer. Even after the war had begun, Burns had a difficult time working up any animosity towards the South and he regretted that a people he admired found it so easy to feel animosity towards him. He lamented that he had “never been able to understand the feelings of enmity generated in the hearts of those from south of an imaginary line against those born north of said imaginary line,” and argued that slavery was merely a “pretense” hiding underlying cultural hostility between the two sections.²³

Burns’ sympathy for the grievances of the South offered him no protection from those determined to rebel in Arkansas. Like the populations in the other states comprising the Upper South, the people of Arkansas initially hesitated at the idea of secession. Many supported the already-seceded Deep South states, but chose to wait and see what approach the Federal government would take to the situation after Lincoln’s inauguration. Having decided upon this approach, the Arkansas secession convention adjourned in March 1861 without voting either for or against disunion. Given that there was still some moderate Unionist sentiment in the northern part of the state, the respite surely allowed some additional debate on the subject as winter turned into spring. However, all semblance of debate vanished after Lincoln’s call for troops in order to take military action against the South in the wake of the newly formed Confederate

government's decision to open fire on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861. Arkansas governor Henry Rector, riding a wave of pro-secession public sentiment, immediately ordered the seizure of Federal arsenals at the state capital of Little Rock and the capture of the garrison at Fort Smith by state militia. The secession convention belatedly supported the governor's precipitous action by voting 69-1 in favor of secession on May 6.²⁴

For Burns and his comrades at Fort Smith, the winter and spring of 1861 must have been a time of nearly unbearable tension. An early decision of the Lincoln administration was to remove the garrison from potential danger in Arkansas to the safety of Fort Leavenworth. On February 13 General-in-Chief Winfield Scott wired orders to Brigadier General William S. Harney, commanding the Department of the West, demanding "the immediate abandonment" of Fort Smith.²⁵ However, upon learning of the fort's planned evacuation, the citizens of the surrounding counties wrote to Secretary of War Simon Cameron of their "deep regret" at the decision and, proclaiming their loyalty, asked that the movement be postponed at least until the state's convention officially voted in favor of secession.²⁶ Scott wired Harney on February 22 with a terse, one-line instruction: "Stop the march of the troops from Fort Smith."²⁷ Trapped by this political decision, the troops at Fort Smith spent the next six weeks before the firing upon Fort Sumter living in fear of finding an angry mob of secession-minded Arkansans gathering at the gates.

Events in Arkansas rapidly spiraled out of control following the fall of Sumter. Governor Rector actively encouraged by the Confederate government in Montgomery,

Alabama, immediately went on the offensive, seizing whatever Federal supplies and equipment his militia could find, and assembling an expedition to head up the Arkansas River by steamer to capture Fort Smith. Lieutenant Colonel William H. Emory, riding west from Fort Smith to take command of Federal troops stationed in Indian Territory, wrote to St. Louis on April 18 of his concern that a year's worth of supplies being sent by steamer to his new command would be intercepted by rebel militia on the Arkansas River.²⁸ Burns, having heard rumors that just such an act was planned, wrote on April 19 that he would "start to-day down the river to meet [the supply steamers], hoping that I can get on the boat, and, by advising with the captain, avoid points and escape excitement."²⁹ Events, as Burns wired to Washington on April 21, did not go as he planned:

On arriving at Little Rock I found military preparations made to intercept all boats loaded with U.S. stores. The steamboat Sky Lark had just passed, after having been boarded and the U.S. stores taken from her at Pine Bluff. I learned (from the paper and otherwise) that the Silver Lake, No. 2, would be seized if not taken at Pine Bluff (cannon were stationed for that purpose and cannoneers ready). I called upon some prominent citizens, heretofore Union men, who advised me to see the governor. I called, but did not find his excellency at home. I very soon discovered that the revolution was general. Troops were enrolling to march on Fort Smith. The steamboat I came down on was chartered. When I arrived at Pine Bluff I found the Silver Lake, No. 2, tied up and strongly guarded. The crew had left, the stores were placed in different houses in town, and the

steamboat was to transport troops to Fort Smith.³⁰

Realizing that Arkansas had become far too dangerous a place for a Federal officer to be wandering about, Burns concluded with his intention to make his way up to St. Louis where he would help plan an overland supply expedition for the forts in Indian Territory.³¹ His position made untenable by the seizure of the supplies at Pine Bluff, Captain Samuel D. Sturgis, Fort Smith's commander, withdrew his troops from that place late in the evening of April 23, leaving behind only a handful of staff officers and orderlies to arrange the transport of any equipment left behind and (rather optimistically) to await the arrival of any who answered Washington's call for pro-Union Arkansas volunteers. Only an hour or two after Sturgis' departure, 235 Arkansas militia under the command of Colonel Solon Borland arrived via steamers and captured the fort and all within. Burns, as chief commissary, would likely have been among those left behind and made prisoners of war had he not been away on his trip down the Arkansas River.³²

With Indian Territory no longer under Federal control, Burns found himself without any active responsibilities. He returned to his native Ohio while waiting for a new assignment. In Cincinnati Burns had the most fateful run-in of his military career: he met with the newly appointed head of all Ohio troops, Major General of Volunteers George B. McClellan. McClellan later recalled that "Capt. Burns . . . happened to pass through Cincinnati unemployed, so that I detained him, and at last kept him permanently."³³ While Burns and McClellan would have been acquainted from their time together at West Point, it is not clear if the two men were friends or correspondents

prior to this meeting. Burns was appointed Chief of Commissary on McClellan's staff on May 2, 1861.³⁴ The captain would have come highly recommended for the post. His service in Florida, Utah, and Arkansas, carrying out heavy responsibilities under difficult conditions, proved his worth as a commissary officer and McClellan jumped at the chance to add Burns to his embryonic staff. When McClellan was appointed head of the newly created Department of Ohio (an area encompassing Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois) on May 3, Burns' responsibilities increased accordingly. With McClellan's promotion to major general in the Regular Army on May 14, Burns was firmly attached to a general whose star was in the ascent.

Facing Burns was the monumental task of organizing supplies for a new department and thousands of newly raised troops, with more arriving every day. Burns had to catalog supplies on hand and those incoming from Washington, arrange supply lines for new camps, and make sure there was enough food and equipment for a plethora of new units. He was probably hindered more than helped by McClellan's conviction, according to historian Stephen W. Sears, that "the Ohio Valley was the scene of a crisis of the highest priority," an attitude which served simply to irritate authorities in Washington rather than inspire any sense of urgency that might have prodded them to ship more of the supplies Burns needed.³⁵ Nevertheless, Burns did his job well enough that, less than a month after the formation of the new department on May 26, McClellan was able to launch a campaign with 15,000 troops to secure western Virginia for the Union.

George McClellan's campaign in western Virginia in the summer of 1861 was one of the early successes of the Union war effort. He quickly secured the vital Baltimore and Ohio Railroad running through the northern part of the region and by July 13 had thoroughly outmaneuvered and scattered a badly outnumbered Confederate army under Brigadier General Robert S. Garnett, who died in the fighting. A pro-Union provisional state government was established in the town of Wheeling and the seeds were sown for the creation of West Virginia as a separate state. It was easily the most impressive campaign conducted by either side in 1861.

Burns' responsibilities as chief of commissary extended to include the western Virginia campaign. He was no stranger to field operations, having served as regimental quartermaster during the Third Seminole War and as chief of commissary for the Utah Expedition in 1857-58. This campaign, however, was a quantum leap beyond anything ever required of him before. Burns was responsible for supplying the entirety of McClellan's force while on the move, a task made even more difficult when McClellan split off a detachment under Brigadier General Jacob Cox to conduct operations in the Great Kanawha Valley. His superior was not an easy man for whom to work. McClellan was often critical of his subordinates and, as Sears notes, "was convinced that very little was done or done right unless he personally supervised it."³⁶ Burns, who had quickly become an ardent admirer of McClellan, thrived under the difficult conditions, never losing the confidence of his general.

McClellan was an easy man to admire. He was a dynamic, energetic, charismatic general who inspired confidence in those around him. His fellow officers were his

strongest supporters and most would give him their unwavering loyalty, as did Burns. His closest circle of friends and admirers among his subordinates were convinced that McClellan was “the only man who [could] save this country from permanent disruption and [the Union] army from disaster.”³⁷ It was probably not coincidence that many of these same officers shared McClellan’s political views. A conservative Democrat, like Burns, McClellan’s “sympathy with Southern attitudes would remain constant-- with the singular exception of the matter of secession”, according to Sears.³⁸

Holding such political views would cause trouble for McClellan, and, by association, his admirers. McClellan believed in waging war against enemy troops, not against civilians. Upon entering western Virginia, he issued a proclamation in which he promised that his army would not interfere with slavery and would “crush” any slave rebellion “with an iron hand.”³⁹ McClellan’s attitude toward the South was not well-received by Radical Republicans in Congress, most of whom favored wielding that “iron hand” against the rebels, be they civilian or military, not against the slaves. For his part, McClellan bore ill will towards extremists on both sides of the conflict, arguing, according to Sears, that “mutual fanaticism” had pushed the country to the brink of disaster.⁴⁰

Any euphoria over McClellan’s successful campaign was short-lived. A Union army under Brigadier General Irvin McDowell advanced from Washington into northern Virginia during the third week of July. On July 21 McDowell attacked a Confederate army at Manassas Junction under Generals Joseph Johnston and P. G. T. Beauregard and before nightfall had been repulsed in a humiliating rout. It was obvious, for national

morale if for no other reason, that McDowell had to be replaced. The most logical and compelling candidate was the conqueror of western Virginia. On July 22 McClellan was recalled to Washington to take command of what would become the Army of the Potomac.

As McClellan rose so did Burns, who was promoted to the rank of major on August 3.⁴¹ Despite this, Burns remained in western Virginia to carry on his duties as chief of commissary for McClellan's successor, Brigadier General William S. Rosecrans. However, Burns now aimed his ambitions higher than serving in the same post under a different general: he wanted to fight. Burns may never have recorded his reasons for wanting a combat command. His obituary states that "staff duty was never exactly congenial to his taste or ambition."⁴² Perhaps he yearned for the opportunities for advancement created by a field command, or perhaps he was shamed by keeping a relatively safe staff position when friends and comrades, such as Oliver Howard and Fitz-John Porter, were putting themselves in danger with the troops, or perhaps he simply wanted the greater glory available on the front lines. McClellan, who was already complaining that he had "good material, but no officers," granted Burns his wish: the thirty-six year old Ohioan was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers on September 28.⁴³ The promotion actually reduced Burns' responsibilities for a time. His new rank warranted a brigade command but there were no such positions open at that moment. Given the mostly quiet nature of the Eastern theater that fall, Burns surely could not have anticipated the quick and violent nature in which a brigade slot would become open.

As summer turned into fall, Union and Confederate armies spent the days facing each other in defensive positions on opposite sides of the Potomac River. In mid-October, McClellan received intelligence reports that the Confederates were reducing the size of the garrison at Leesburg, Virginia, geographically the most important point in the Confederate line along the upper Potomac. Still in the midst of organizing and training the Army of the Potomac to his specifications, McClellan had no interest in fighting a battle for Leesburg. However, he was receiving criticism from Radical Republicans in Congress who wanted to see the Army of the Potomac take some action rather than lick its wounds in plain view of the enemy. Taking an opportunity for gaining a victory through maneuver rather than fighting, McClellan ordered a division under Brigadier General George McCall, positioned just on the Virginia side of the river in front of Washington, to advance north toward Leesburg while another division under Brigadier General Charles Stone threatened the town from across the river to the east. On October 20, McClellan ordered Stone to monitor Leesburg for any withdrawal on the part of the Confederate garrison prompted by McCall to the south, and suggested that “a slight demonstration on your part [might] have the effect to move them.”⁴⁴ McClellan never intended for Stone to cross the river, but Stone chose to exercise the discretion allowed by McClellan’s vague order and conduct a small raid on the Confederate defenses on the other side of the Potomac. To make matters worse, McCall was ordered back to camp on October 21 after no movement on the part of the Confederate garrison was observed.⁴⁵

Stone's first move was to cross the river with a detachment of 300 men from the 15th Massachusetts Regiment for a reconnaissance mission at a place called Ball's Bluff on the night of October 20. The young captain in charge of the mission mistook haystacks for tents in the moonlight and reported that there was only a small, inattentive Confederate force near Leesburg, leading Stone to believe that a prompt crossing could be made safely the following day.⁴⁶

On the morning of October 21, Stone assigned command of the movement on Leesburg to Colonel Edward Baker, commander of the Philadelphia (or California) Brigade, allowing him the discretion to either proceed with the raid or to withdraw back across the river. Baker was a prominent Republican and an Oregon senator, as well as a close friend of Abraham Lincoln, turned officer whose military experience in the Black Hawk and Mexican Wars evidently taught him little in the way of forethought. He almost immediately decided to bring the remainder of the 15th Massachusetts across the Potomac as well as all four regiments of his brigade. Crossing an additional 1,400 men in small boats took all morning, during which time the Massachusetts troops came under fire from the lead elements of Colonel Nathan "Shanks" Evans' brigade of Mississippi and Virginia troops, victorious veterans of First Manassas. Evans had been made aware of Stone's plans through dispatches removed from a captured Union courier the day before and quickly marched his battle-hardened men to contain the small bridgehead without being distracted by a downriver feint Stone intended to prevent just such a concentration.⁴⁷

The Union troops had been taking casualties from heavy Confederate fire for some time before Baker himself crossed the river around 2:00 p.m. Arriving in time to witness the repulse of a probing attack from a Mississippi regiment, Baker went out front to steady his men and organize a counterattack. Standing out in front of the Union line, Baker was rushed by a group of Confederates, one of whom emptied a revolver at the Union commander. Baker died instantly from the nearly simultaneous impact of four to six bullets.⁴⁸

Demoralized by Baker's death, mounting casualties, and their precarious position at the edge of the bluff overlooking the river, the Union troops wavered. Baker's subordinates decided a withdrawal was necessary, but all organization was lost as the troops tried to move to the water's edge under the heavy fire. The Union men panicked and soon were sliding down the bluff and jumping into the river. The Confederates advanced and fired into the disorganized mass, and large groups of Union soldiers began to surrender. By the end, less than 800 men of the 1,700 that crossed under Baker made it to safety. Bodies of drowned Union soldiers washed up on the riverbank in Washington for days afterwards. It was this shattered brigade that Burns was placed in command of on October 30.⁴⁹

Endnotes

¹ Warner, *Generals In Blue*, 56. *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774-1989* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1989), 710. *Annual Reunion of the Association of the Graduates of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York* (West Point, N.Y.: The Association, 1892), 92-93 (hereafter *Annual Reunion*). A search for Burns' application papers in the USMA archives turned up only a form letter signed by Burns and his father acknowledging his appointment to the academy, any other papers evidently being lost.

² James I. Robertson, Jr., *Stonewall Jackson: The Man, The Soldier, The Legend* (New York: Macmillan, 1997), 31. John C. Waugh, *The Class of 1846: From West Point to Appomattox: Stonewall Jackson, George McClellan and Their Brothers* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 9, 13.

³ Quoted in Joseph R. C. Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: Grant, Faires, and Rodgers, 1883), 103-4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵ Robert Garth Scott, ed., *Forgotten Valor: The Memoirs, Journals, and Civil War Letters of Orlando B. Willcox* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1999), 87.

⁶ George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy at West Point*, vol. 2 (New York: Appleton, 1868), 336-337.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 336. Mexican War Service Pension Records, Records of the War Department, The National Archives, Washington, D.C., hereafter Mexican War Pension Records, NARA. *Annual Reunion*, 93-94, 99.

⁸ Jerry Thompson, *Confederate General of the West: Henry Hopkins Sibley* (Natchitoches, La.: Northwestern State University Press, 1987), 100, 103.

⁹ William W. Burns, "Military Biography of W. W. Burns, U. S. Army and some civil functions, 1825-1885," Burns Papers, TAMU.

¹⁰ Thompson, *Sibley*, 103. The blueprint for the new tent was heavily discussed during Brazorian Society meetings and the society originally considered it to be a joint venture on their part, naming it the Brazorian tent. In a gesture of generosity towards their popular, and broke, society president, the members of the society voted to transfer all rights and title to the design to Brevet Major Sibley; hence the Sibley tent.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Cullum, *Biographical Register*, 336.

¹⁵ Oliver Otis Howard, *Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard: Major General United States Army*, vol. 1 (New York: Baker and Taylor Company, 1907), 75.

- ¹⁶ Durwood Ball, *Army Regulars on the Western Frontier, 1848-1861* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 160-1.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 162. Charles P. Roland, *Albert Sidney Johnston, Soldier of Three Republics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964; reprint, University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 198.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 164-165. William W. Burns to Fitz-John Porter, 1 September, 1858, Burns Papers, TAMU.
- ¹⁹ George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union* (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1887), 111.
- ²⁰ Brian Holden Reid, *The Origins of the American Civil War* (New York: Longman, 1996), 240.
- ²¹ William W. Burns to unknown, 22 May 1861, Burns Papers, TAMU.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 282.
- ²⁵ L. Thomas to Brig. Gen. William S. Harney, 13 February 1861, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 1861-1865* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series 1, Volume 1, p. 654 (hereafter O. R.).
- ²⁶ Geo. Ruddy et al. to the Secretary of War, 22 February 1861, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 1, p. 655.
- ²⁷ Winfield Scott to Harney, 22 February 1861, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 1, p. 656.
- ²⁸ W. H. Emory to Capt. S. Williams, 18 April, 1861, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 1, p. 668.
- ²⁹ Burns to Major Waggaman, 19 April 1861, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 1, p. 647.
- ³⁰ Burns to Colonel Jos. P. Taylor, 21 April 1861, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 1, p. 647.
- ³¹ Burns was unaware at the time that Scott had already ordered Emory on April 17 to abandon all posts in Indian Territory and march his troops to Fort Leavenworth.
- ³² L. David Norris, James C. Milligan, and Odie B. Faulk, *William H. Emory, Soldier-Scientist* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 200. Report of Capt. Alexander Montgomery, 24 April, 1861, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 1, p. 651. Michael B. Dougan, *Confederate Arkansas: The People and Policies of a Frontier State in Wartime* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1976), 61.
- ³³ *McClellan's Own Story*, 45.
- ³⁴ "Military Biography of W. W. Burns", Burns Papers, TAMU. Cullum lists Burns as becoming Chief of Commissary of the Dept. of Ohio on March 24. Given that Burns was still at Ft. Smith in late April, that date is obviously incorrect.

³⁵ Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1988), 74.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁷ William W. Burns to [Mrs. George B. McClellan], 11 November 1862, Burns Papers, TAMU.

³⁸ Sears, *Young Napoleon*, 6.

³⁹ McClellan's proclamation, quoted in *ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴¹ Cullum, *Biographical Register*, 336.

⁴² *Annual Reunion*, 96.

⁴³ Quoted in Sears, *Young Napoleon*, 98. Cullum, *Biographical Register*, 336.

⁴⁴ A. V. Colburn to Brigadier-General Stone, October 20, 1861, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 5, p. 290.

⁴⁵ Sears, *Young Napoleon*, 120-121. Byron Farwell, *Ball's Bluff: A Small Battle and Its Long Shadow* (McLean, Va.: EPM Publications, 1990), 67.

⁴⁶ Kim Bernard Holien, *Battle at Ball's Bluff* (Orange, Va.: Moss Publications, 1985), 27.

⁴⁷ Warner, *Generals in Blue*, 16. Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 26-35. Holien, *Ball's Bluff*, 27. Gary G. Lash, "Duty Well Done": *The History of Edward Baker's California Regiment (71st Pennsylvania Infantry)* (Baltimore: Butternut and Blue, 2001), 115-124.

⁴⁸ Lash, "Duty Well Done", 115-124.

⁴⁹ Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 35-38. Lash, "Duty Well Done", 124-135. Burns, "Etat de Service in Command of Volunteer troops in war of Rebellion and Events," Burns Papers, TAMU.

CHAPTER III

AN ABLE GENERAL

Edward Baker's old "California" brigade was a shambles, left for someone else to pick up its pieces and rejuvenate it. Whatever Baker's failures as a tactician, the warrior-senator had been a tremendously popular commander. Skills learned from a long and successful political career translated well for Baker as a camp commander, gaining him the affection and respect of his men. Furthermore, Baker proved lax in the administration of discipline, a trait bound to endear him to soldiers not used to the hard life of the army. His death and the subsequent mauling suffered by the brigade left the men mournful and demoralized. Thus Burns' immediate concerns as the incoming commander were dealing with the psychological aftermath of the defeat at Ball's Bluff and applying firm discipline to a unit unfamiliar with such measures.¹

Burns understood the situation well and took his responsibility seriously. He later explained to a group of veterans from his brigade that, "I had to be cruel, only to be kind . . . your health, your life, and your honor were in my keeping, all shaken at Ball's Bluff, and to be tried in future fields."² And cruel he was, establishing "a strict and impartial code of discipline that applied to officers and men alike."³ No longer was the comfort of the men the primary consideration of their commander, instead only their efficiency as soldiers. Where Baker had strolled amiably through the camps, stopping to chat with his men to keep their spirits high, Burns stalked through, watching keenly for any sign of lax discipline. He once spotted a private walking a lackadaisical patrol along a camp perimeter: the general approached him quietly from behind, grabbed the rifle off

the shoulder of the unsuspecting guard, and lectured him on the importance of taking his duty more seriously before sending the humiliated private off to spend three days in the guard house. The soldiers quickly learned to be on alert for their new brigade commander at all times. Given Burns' predilection towards high standards of discipline and the sorry state of the brigade before his arrival, the Ohioan was surely among the best possible choices to replace the fallen Baker.⁴

There would be no more fighting for the Philadelphia Brigade until spring came to the Potomac. Baker had bivouacked the brigade on an exposed hilltop, in range of Confederate guns across the river and with no protection from the elements. With winter looming, Burns relocated his troops to a more wooded area offering a degree of shelter from the storms to come. It must have pleased him when the brigade was issued Sibley tents in December. Beneficially, from Burns' point of view, the winter proved mild enough to allow drilling to remain part of the daily routine. Officers carrying copies of *Hardee's Tactics* could be found putting the brigade's various regiments through their paces for the duration of the winter.⁵

Burns and the Philadelphia Brigade were going through a process that mirrored in many ways that of George McClellan and the Army of the Potomac during the winter of 1861-62. While Irvin McDowell had been nowhere near as popular to the army as Edward Baker had been to his brigade, both Burns and McClellan inherited units that had recently suffered humiliation at the hands of the enemy. Both bodies of troops were unused to the strict discipline necessary for success in a hard-fought battle and would require extensive drilling before they stood ready for a return engagement against a

confident foe inspired by recent victories. Officers such as Burns played a vital part of this transformation. Competent commanders with an eye for discipline were required in numbers in order to train the great mass of volunteers that made up the Army of the Potomac. Burns possessed the necessary qualities and took to his task with enthusiasm, inspiring the regimental commanders in his brigade to the point that “they displayed a worthy spirit of emulation in their endeavors to improve the excellence of their comrades.”⁶ Therefore Burns and dozens like him carried out McClellan’s plan to train and transform the Army of the Potomac. The Philadelphia Brigade’s official historian remarked that their camp along the Potomac that winter could have been named “Camp Preparation.”⁷

Events further up the Potomac forced Burns’ brigade out of its winter camp earlier than he would have liked. With an offensive beginning on New Year’s Day, 1862, Confederate Major General “Stonewall” Jackson maneuvered a Federal garrison out of the small town of Romney in the northwest corner of the Shenandoah Valley. This move relieved pressure on the western flank of Jackson’s main base of operations across the Valley at Winchester. Of more concern to Washington, the Federal retreat also exposed the Virginia section of the strategically important Baltimore & Ohio Railroad to Jackson’s army. “Stonewall” wasted little time taking advantage of the opportunity, destroying nearly 100 miles of track by the end of January.⁸

Growing concerned, McClellan took steps to counter Jackson’s move. Brigadier General John Sedgwick, commander of the 2nd Division, the Philadelphia Brigade’s new parent unit, was ordered on February 21 to take two brigades to the assistance of Major

General Nathaniel P. Banks at Harpers Ferry.⁹ Burns and his brigade left their winter camp four days later for what proved to be a month-long deployment to Harpers Ferry. Despite a brief march to the outskirts of Winchester, there was to be no test of combat for the new brigade commander on this occasion; with Banks' far superior numbers to his front and with his right flank uncovered by Joe Johnston's sudden withdrawal from his line along the Potomac, Jackson was compelled to relinquish his gains and retreat to safety farther up the Shenandoah Valley. Instead, the brigade was subjected to freezing temperatures and marched through pouring rains for what seemed to be little purpose. Even worse, Burns found that adequate supplies could not be secured for his men after their arrival at Harpers Ferry. Morale among Burns' tired, cold, and hungry men sank as they were transferred from western Virginia to Washington, D.C., near the end of March.¹⁰

Appalled, Burns later recorded that this "ill-judged campaign . . . in snow, rain, and mud, without shelter or supplies . . . [wasted] most of the good of the two month's discipline, blighting the self-reliance and ambition which go to make the true soldier."¹¹ Historian Bradley Gottfried argues, with the benefit of hindsight, that the campaign was a waste of time, since "Jackson would have abandoned Winchester whether there had been a buildup of Union troops or not."¹² This may be true, but it could not have been known at the time, given that Johnston's withdrawal from the Potomac was not predicted. Burns, despite his initial frustration, would find in the coming months that the short campaign had not harmed his brigade in any appreciable manner.

Sedgwick's division, including Burns' brigade, was recalled to Washington in order to join the rest of the Army of the Potomac for what General McClellan envisioned as a bold campaign against the Confederate capital of Richmond and its defending army. McClellan's tenure at the head of the Army of the Potomac thus far was notable mainly for his apparent inactivity and a great deal of secrecy regarding his plans for the future. McClellan spent his winter defending the need to take several months to organize and train his volunteer army and resting in bed after contracting typhoid fever in late December.¹³

Finally, after insistent prodding by Lincoln, in early February McClellan unveiled an ambitious plan to outflank the Confederate army at Manassas Junction by loading his troops onto transports and steaming down the Chesapeake Bay to land at Urbanna, between Johnston's army and Richmond. Lincoln approved the plan and steps were put in motion to accomplish the task. Then, on March 8, Johnston withdrew his army from Manassas to a position closer to Richmond, unwittingly rendering the Urbanna plan obsolete by placing his troops closer to the Confederate capital than McClellan's proposed landing site.¹⁴

Adapting quickly to the changed circumstances, McClellan altered his plan from landing at Urbanna to landing at Fort Monroe, a Federal-held bastion on the southern tip of the Virginia Peninsula, seventy-five miles southeast of Richmond. While not his preferred option, landing at Fort Monroe offered McClellan the same benefits as did Urbanna: a chance to threaten Richmond before the Confederates could react effectively, forcing Johnston's army to fight in unfavorable conditions. Sedgwick's

division, due to its assignment to the Shenandoah Valley, was one of the last divisions to embark for the Peninsula. Burns' brigade marched to Alexandria, Virginia, in late March to board steamers bound for Fort Monroe; the 3,624 men under his command all arrived at the crowded fortress by March 31.¹⁵

McClellan arrived at Fort Monroe on April 2 and immediately began the process of setting his army in motion. On April 4 the first of over 66,000 men set off down the Peninsula's two main roads in the direction of Yorktown. Sedgwick's division was among the lead units marching down the Yorktown Road. Burns' men met little opposition on what proved to be an easy march to Big Bethel, the winter camp of the Confederate forces at Yorktown during the prior months. They stopped there for the night, expecting to complete their march to Yorktown during the following morning. In the morning Burns' brigade, and the rest of the Army of the Potomac, encountered the first of many challenges during this campaign: mud. A morning rainstorm turned the Yorktown Road into a morass of knee-deep mud, slowing the brigade's progress to a crawl. After leaving camp at 5:00 a.m., Burns' men could slog through only five miles of mud in four hours before stopping to rest and wait out the rain. They resumed their march early in the afternoon and reached the vicinity of the Confederate fortifications at Yorktown before stopping for the day.¹⁶

On April 6, McClellan selected Burns' brigade to conduct the first unit-level reconnaissance of the Confederate position, focusing on that part of the line between the two main roads. In particular, McClellan wanted to know the locations of any masked enemy artillery batteries. Burns' men were expected to march across the Confederate

front, luring any such batteries into revealing their position by opening fire. Excited at his first opportunity for some real action, Burns selected two regiments, the 72nd and 106th Pennsylvania Volunteers, to personally lead on the mission.¹⁷

Burns put his men into formation shortly after dawn, throwing out skirmishers to his front and flanks. Approaching the Confederate line, Burns' two regiments entered a densely wooded area, forcing Burns to lead them in the right direction with only the aid of a pocket compass. As the woods cleared, the Pennsylvanians suddenly hit the Confederate picket line, driving the enemy skirmishers back towards the main line. Burns' men came under artillery fire from the fortifications shortly thereafter. The position of the offending artillery battery was quickly noted and Burns withdrew his men to safety, only to repeat the process further down the line. In this manner Burns and his two regiments made their way down the six miles of Confederate fortifications between the Yorktown Road and the Lee's Mill Road. Upon reaching Lee's Mill, Burns pulled back from the enemy line, having successfully located the positions of several batteries without incurring the loss of a single man.¹⁸

McClellan was unprepared to find a Confederate defensive line stretching across the width of the Peninsula and was dismayed by the apparent strength of the enemy position. Frustrated, he reacted in the manner dictated by his personality and his training; he abandoned the idea of a bold thrust at Richmond and settled in for a safe, cautious siege against Yorktown. Confederate Major General John Magruder, commanding the forces defending Yorktown, enthusiastically aided and abetted this reaction by repeatedly marching his soldiers back and forth across the length of his line,

convincing McClellan that the rebel general had far more than a mere 15,000 men defending the position.¹⁹

Burns' brigade, along with the rest of the Army of the Potomac, settled in for what proved to be a month-long siege while McClellan arranged to bring up the artillery and equipment he believed necessary to reduce Magruder's fortifications. The Pennsylvanians endured frequent heavy rains, shivered on cold, wet nights, and slogged through incredible amounts of mud to build roads for an army that was not moving. Burns marched his brigade out of camp every three days to spend twenty-four tense hours on picket duty in front of the enemy line, where the fear of Confederate snipers forced his men to suffer the miserable conditions without even the benefit of campfires. Morale sagged among the Yankee troops as April dragged on.²⁰

Some comic relief during the siege of Yorktown was provided by the mid-air misadventures of Fitz John Porter. On April 11 the Union general ascended alone in one of the hot-air balloons brought along by McClellan for aerial reconnaissance of the Confederate lines. Strong winds broke the line tethering Porter's balloon to the ground and, undoubtedly to Porter's great discomfort, pushed the balloon beyond Union lines and over enemy territory. To Porter's relief, and that of the Union soldiers watching the unfolding fiasco, the wind soon shifted and the balloon drifted back over the line. As soon as he hit the line the desperate Porter put the balloon into a hard descent and crash-landed in the Philadelphia Brigade's camp. Burns invited the rattled Porter into his headquarters tent for a drink to calm his jangled nerves after his unanticipated brush with capture.²¹

Showing his concern for the ebbing morale of his volunteers, Burns tried to raise the spirits of his men with a proclamation issued the next day, April 12. In General Order No. 13 Burns relayed to the brigade his “proud satisfaction of seeing day by day, constant improvement in all the essential elements of soldierly patience, endurance, energy, and skill, and discipline which goes to make the veteran soldier.” He told the men of his “full confidence . . . that you will acquit yourselves honorably,” reassuring them that “hundreds are killed in retreat, while but few fall advancing-- ‘fortune favors the brave’.” Burns concluded his address with a melodramatic, Nelsonian flourish: “The eyes of your general, your relations, your country will be upon you.” Burns meant well, but it is unlikely that General Orders No. 13 had much impact on any but the most impressionable young men. His soldiers doubtless would have preferred an announcement of an upcoming end to the tedium of siege warfare to a declaration of confidence in their ability to fight.²²

April dragged on as McClellan assembled a collection of siege artillery in order to pulverize the Confederate positions prior to an assault on the shattered enemy line by the Army of the Potomac. The Union general grew more confident as the bulk of the equipment began to arrive near the end of the month, inspiring him to finally set a date of May 5 for the beginning of the bombardment, with the infantry to follow within the next day or two. Burns and his brigade would be among the many to storm the enemy fortifications. The moment of truth seemed to have arrived.²³

Joseph Johnston, who had taken command of the Confederate forces at Yorktown earlier in April after arriving with badly needed reinforcements, was not

oblivious to the Federal preparations. Recognizing the near-certitude of crushing defeat at the hands of McClellan's methodical plan, Johnston elected to withdraw his army farther up the peninsula to a position closer to Richmond. With the aid of a few hastily devised ruses, and under the cover of an artillery barrage designed to keep suspicious Yankee heads down, Johnston slipped away on the night of May 3, taking his entire army with him.²⁴

Caught entirely flat-footed, it took twelve hours for the Union army to organize any kind of pursuit of the retreating Confederates. Northern soldiers gradually made their way into the abandoned enemy camps during the day, soon discovering a multitude of primitive land mines, then called torpedoes, left behind by vengeful Southerners. This threat caused the ever-cautious McClellan to prohibit Burns' men, among others, from entering the empty camps across the line. Instead, they were to hold their position until the next day when they, along with the rest of Sedgwick's division, would march to Yorktown. Burns' eager soldiers spent May 4 sitting on their knapsacks watching "regiment after regiment march off to Yorktown."²⁵

May 5 greeted the Philadelphia Brigade with heavy rain and knee-deep mud, turning a short march into a miserable slog. It was an inauspicious beginning to what would prove to be a month-long pursuit of Johnston's army up the Peninsula to the outskirts of Richmond. It got worse the next day when Burns lost a man, Private John Green of the 69th Pennsylvania Volunteer Regiment, to a torpedo in one of the abandoned camps near Yorktown. The remainder of May saw Burns and his men endure a short time reembarked on the transports to take part in a flanking maneuver that failed

to materialize and repeated marches through heavy rain until they approached within twenty miles of Richmond as the month drew to a close.²⁶

Burns dealt with the conditions perhaps less well than many of his men. Rheumatism afflicted the back of his neck and his shoulders, an ailment that could only have been exacerbated by the frequent rain. He wore a silk handkerchief around his neck at all times for protection from the elements yet pain dogged him with each shift of the weather. Nonetheless, Burns persevered despite his discomfort, taking care never to let his men see him in low spirits. A few aches and pains were a small price to pay for the opportunity to finally lead men into battle.²⁷

Having traded as much space for time as he could without marching into the streets of Richmond, Joe Johnston finally decided the time had come to take the offensive. It had not gone unnoticed in the Confederate headquarters that McClellan had incautiously divided his army on either side of the Chickahominy River. Making the situation more dangerous for the Federals, the heavy rains swelled the river to the point that bridges were washed out and normal fords were impassable. Johnston devised a straightforward plan involving bringing fully three-quarters of his army against the Union left wing, striking it from three directions and intending to crush it while McClellan and the rest of his army looked on helplessly from across the rushing waters of the Chickahominy.²⁸

Burns' brigade, along with the rest of Edwin Sumner's Second Corps, spent the night of May 30 in position to the north of the Chickahominy, taking shelter from a tremendous thunderstorm that drenched the area that evening. Morning brought the

Philadelphia Brigade a rare moment of sunshine, in addition to the welcome sight of the paymaster. Heavy flooding in the lowlands around them precluded all but the most urgent movement, and the Pennsylvanians spent the morning collecting their pay and generally drying out. The quiet day lasted until 1:00 p.m., when the rumble of heavy gunfire drifted across the flooded river, marking the opening of Johnston's surprise attack.²⁹

Burns reacted calmly, ordering his men to draw rations and prepare to be on the march at a moment's notice. McClellan moved slowly, issuing orders to Sumner's corps only to be ready to move upon further word. Sumner, an aggressive veteran, chose a liberal interpretation of this order, starting Sedgwick's division on the three-quarter mile march down to the nearest bridge where it would wait for the order to cross. Burns' brigade left the camp at 2:00 p.m., making the difficult hike through deep mud and standing water in admirable time; it stood waiting at the Grapevine Bridge when McClellan's order to cross came at 2:30. Rushing water lapped at the underside of the frail-looking bridge, making it twist and turn, causing an engineer to pronounce the crossing unsafe. Sumner, however, would not be stopped by mere water, and Burns' men lined up to cross the narrow structure.³⁰

Crossing in front of the Philadelphia Brigade were the six Napoleon guns of Lieutenant Edmund Kirby's Battery I, 1st United States Artillery. One of the cannon snapped through the flooring of the rickety bridge, becoming stuck beyond the ability of the gun's crew to move it. Burns, judging the value of having the artillery available as he went into battle worth a short delay, ordered his men to stop and disassemble the

Napoleon, then carry the separate pieces across the bridge. Sumner was already on the south side of the river, urging his men forward towards the battle. Any delay in reaching this goal exasperated the old corps commander and he called out to Burns to leave the artillery to its own devices and get his men across. Showing flashes of a stubborn streak that would cripple his career within a year, Burns ignored Sumner and held his brigade back until the guns were safely across. Twice more the fuming corps commander demanded that Burns keep moving, each time Burns insisted on waiting. Before Sumner could repeat his command a fourth time, the guns were across and the Philadelphia Brigade rushed to the south bank. Kirby's battery, due to the help of Burns' men, was the only one of the five attached to Sumner's corps that made it across the Chickahominy in time to participate in the fighting that day.³¹

Once his four regiments were across, Burns ordered his men to the double-quick for the three-mile march to the battlefield. Wounded men struggling through the mud to reach shelter across the river greeted the Pennsylvanians within the first mile, and the sound of gunfire echoed louder through the thick woods as Burns and his men approached the fighting. Even at the double-quick, the thick mud slowed the march to a crawl, and it was 5:30 p.m. when the Philadelphia Brigade emerged from the woods onto the battlefield at Fair Oaks Station.³²

Burns arrived in time to witness the final unraveling of Joe Johnston's plan. While the initial attack of Confederate Major General Daniel H. Hill's division earlier that afternoon had driven back the two Union divisions of Brigadier Generals Darius Couch and Silas Casey, the expected coordinated supporting attacks by other

Confederate units had not occurred. Now, Brigadier General Chase Whiting's Confederate division was conducting its own isolated assault against the Union troops defending a line at Fair Oaks Station, several hours after Hill's attack. This was the position that Sedgwick's men arrived to reinforce. They arrived just in time, as Sedgwick pushed his first brigade and Kirby's battery forward to help stop Whiting's first attack on the Union position.³³

At Sedgwick's orders, Burns started to form his brigade into battalions in mass, creating a second line in support of the first, already engaged line. As the brigade watched the repulse of Whiting's attack, Colonel D. C. Baxter of the 72nd Pennsylvania Volunteers cried out "That's the music boys; now for three cheers!"³⁴ Caught up in the moment, Burns turned to his men, waving his hat in the air and adding "Let them be hearty!"³⁵ Before the brigade finished sorting out its formation Sedgwick developed concerns about the exposed right flank of the first line and ordered Burns to take two regiments to extend that end of the line, leaving his other two regiments in reserve under Sedgwick's command. Burns selected the 69th and 72nd and led them to the desired location. Connecting the left end of his line to the right of the original line proved challenging; the combination of a wooded area immediately behind the lines and the fact that the regiment at the end of the first line changed face at least once during the battle foiled the first two attempts to join the lines, forcing Burns to personally lead his troops into the right position. By the time this was accomplished night approached and the left and center of the Union line had repulsed the last Confederate attack of the day.³⁶

While Burns played only a small role in the fighting on the front line at Fair Oaks, his actions during the day had a significant impact on the outcome of the battle. With Whiting having left his artillery behind as he brought his troops up to attack Fair Oaks, Lieutenant Kirby's battery, along with the remnants of another battery already on the field, was the only formation of artillery on either side to take part in the fighting. One of his guns got stuck in the mud south of the Chickahominy, but the other five met each Confederate attack with a punishing fire. Sedgwick reported that Kirby's "terrific fire . . . contributed in a very high degree to break and finally scatter [Confederate] forces."³⁷ Kirby recorded that, even after losing a gun early in the action to a broken trail, his battery fired 343 rounds that afternoon, including 48 rounds of canister for close-range combat. Perhaps most significantly, it was a shell from Kirby's battery that unhorsed Joe Johnston, observing the battle from several hundred yards away, leaving him severely wounded and clearing the way for Robert E. Lee to take command of the Confederate army.³⁸

Burns' efforts to improve the training and discipline of his brigade showed in the actions of his men in their first significant fight after Ball's Bluff. Sedgwick wrote that the two regiments left under his command during the battle "were several times moved from their positions to different portions of the field at double-quick, evincing their eagerness to become engaged."³⁹ He also commented that the brigade "gave unmistakable evidence of being ready if ordered forward to rush to the support of their comrades with alacrity and unshrinking firmness."⁴⁰ Despite not being heavily engaged, the brigade lost five killed and thirty wounded during the afternoon, almost entirely from

the two regiments left behind with Sedgwick. Burns' pride shines through in his after-action report: "I am entirely satisfied with the conduct of my brigade. It has been christened under fire, and will do what is required of it."⁴¹

Around midnight Sumner ordered Burns to take his California Regiment and three other reserve regiments from other brigades and fall back to the bridgehead over the Chickahominy to cover their line of communication and protect the artillery still stuck in the mud. In the early hours of the morning Burns learned of a road around the Union right flank that was unguarded by any Northern soldiers. Concerned about a possible enemy flanking maneuver, Burns roused the California Regiment from their sleep and posted them at a farm on that road. McClellan, riding by the next day, praised Burns for his initiative and declared the farm "the key to the position."⁴² Burns was with the regiment when fighting resumed at Fair Oaks that morning. By the time he reached the scene of the previous day's fighting the Confederate attacks had been beaten back and the battle was over.⁴³

Both armies spent the next three weeks licking their wounds and preparing for the next fight. Lee, having taken over for the wounded Johnston, needed time to reorganize the command structure of the newly christened Army of Northern Virginia into what he hoped would be a more efficient system. In the meantime, he awaited the arrival of "Stonewall" Jackson and his troops from the Shenandoah Valley. McClellan, concerned by the near debacle at Fair Oaks, needed time to build up infrastructure in his rear areas, putting better bridges across the Chickahominy and laying new roads through the forest. Like Lee, he too awaited reinforcements, with his coming from Washington.

Despite the lack of movement in the lines, these weeks were not a time of inactivity for Burns and his men. Camped at times within 100 yards of the picket lines, Burns maintained a constant vigilance, keeping his men on alert for Rebel forays into his position. The Confederates did not disappoint and small skirmishes were frequent. Even during times of relative quiet, random sniping from the enemy pickets kept life dangerous. An unofficial truce among the opposing pickets had been arranged on the 106th's part of the line. Burns, apparently finding this development a bit too unmilitary for his tastes, ended the truce by sending sharpshooters out to "annoy the enemy."⁴⁴ Suitably annoyed, the Confederates responded the next day by wheeling up some artillery and spraying a few rounds of canister into the Federal pickets, causing several casualties and ending "that sort of experiment while on this line."⁴⁵

This uneasy period of intense skirmishing gave way to a week of frantic activity and heavy fighting beginning on June 25, the first of what would come to be known as the Seven Days. With Jackson's arrival imminent, Lee developed a plan to take the offensive, pushing the Army of the Potomac away from Richmond, if not destroying it outright. McClellan made his last offensive move of the campaign on the 25th, pushing a half-hearted foray against part of the Confederate lines in front of the city with inconclusive results. The next day saw Lee's first move, an attack against Fitz John Porter's Fifth Corps at Mechanicsville, an attempted flanking maneuver that fell victim to a lack of coordination similar to that which plagued Johnston at Fair Oaks. Despite the tactical failure of Lee's initial attack, McClellan proved easily intimidated. Already believing himself outnumbered, the specter of being outflanked as well prompted the

Union commander to postpone his goal of taking Richmond and to plot a withdrawal to the safety of the James River, where the heavy artillery of his gunboats could protect him while he planned his next move. McClellan's conviction that he must save his army from destruction was strengthened when Lee broke through Porter's lines at Gaines' Mill on the 27th. The ensuing battles of the next four days would be products of Lee's attempts to catch McClellan at vulnerable points during his retreat, hoping to destroy large segments of his army at once.⁴⁶

By virtue of its position on the line covering the road network, Sedgwick's division, and thus Burns' brigade, was part of the force assigned to shield the retreat against probing Confederates. June 28 was a day of uncertainty; Burns' brigade was ordered to strike camp and prepare to move without knowing if they would be retreating or advancing. To the disappointment of the men, and doubtless of Burns as well, orders finally came down in the pre-dawn hours of the 29th to withdraw to the southeast, covering a junction of the Nine Mile Road and the Richmond & York River Railroad named Savage Station.⁴⁷

Savage Station had been a railhead for the right wing of McClellan's army and Federal troops were frantically moving from that place what supplies they could and burning those they could not. More significantly, from Savage Station the Union rear guard could cover two important roads: the Nine Mile Road, leading back to Grapevine Bridge, Jackson's anticipated crossing point of the Chickahominy, and the Williamsburg Road, along which two Confederate divisions under General Magruder were advancing.

Failure to defend this point would leave the retreating Union column vulnerable to being rolled up from behind.

Burns arrived at a place called Orchard Station, two miles northwest of Savage Station, and placed his brigade in line with other brigades from Sumner's corps. Shortly thereafter, Sedgwick ordered Burns to send one regiment back to its old position to serve as a picket for the division. Burns selected the California Regiment. It advanced only to find Confederate skirmishers in the abandoned camp with large bodies of infantry coming up behind them. Faced with being swamped by the oncoming Confederates, the regiment withdrew to Allen's Farm, a position in front of the main Union line, where they were supported by two flanking regiments. There they prepared to receive the advancing Georgians of Colonel George Anderson's brigade.⁴⁸

At this time, about 9:00 a.m., Sedgwick directed Burns to take command of the line at Allen's Farm. Burns accompanied a pair of batteries forward, directing them into position to support his troops. Determining that he needed more troops, the Ohioan headed back towards the main line, halting after finding a fresh regiment, the 53rd Pennsylvania, behind a house 100 yards to the rear of the advance line. Colonel John Brooke, commander of the 53rd, at first refused to move his men, insisting that this was where his brigade commander wanted him. Angered, Burns snapped that as commander of this line his orders would be obeyed, and Brooke relented. Thus reinforced, the line at Allen's Farm held against Anderson's probing attacks, and the fighting sputtered out shortly after 11:00 a.m. The California Regiment, the only formation of Burns' brigade involved in the fight, suffered thirty casualties that morning, including six killed.⁴⁹

Knowing that Confederates could be advancing past his flanks at any time, Sumner ordered Sedgwick to march his division the last two miles to Savage Station as quickly as possible. Burns put his men on the road in the blazing July sun shortly after noon. Heat and exhaustion took their toll and the oncoming enemy swept up stragglers. By 3:00 p. m. Burns' trailing regiments were crossing through the previously established lines at Savage Station; they rested behind the lines and watched the burning of the remaining supplies at that place. Little rest could be found before a crisis loomed.⁵⁰

At about 4:30 p. m. Confederate troops, a brigade of South Carolinians commanded by Brigadier General Joseph B. Kershaw, were sighted by Sedgwick emerging into a clearing along the Williamsburg Road, headed east towards Savage Station. Union Brigadier General Samuel P. Heintzelman, whose Third Corps covered that approach earlier in the day, had concluded that his troops were not needed at Savage Station and put them on the march south towards White Oak Swamp early that afternoon without notifying Sumner. Kershaw's rebels now approached the completely exposed flank of Sumner's corps. Alarmed, Sumner answered the threat with the first units he could find: two regiments of Burns' Philadelphia Brigade.⁵¹

Burns advanced his two regiments, the 72nd and 106th Pennsylvania Volunteers, a half-mile westward into a wide clearing bordered to the south by the Williamsburg Road and to the north by the Richmond & York River Railroad. Despite the urgency of the situation, Burns maintained a sense of calm and discipline, making sure the move, "although executed with great promptness, was performed as deliberately as if on parade."⁵² Burns placed his regiments in front of a north-south running fence 500 yards

into the clearing, thirty paces from the woods that formed its western edge. He threw out skirmishers into the woods to his front, they quickly returned to report that a large body of enemy infantry was advancing through the woods and would be upon his position soon. Burns, who had already decided two regiments were not enough to cover the entire clearing, used the brief interlude to send back an urgent request to Sumner for reinforcements. Sumner sent the first regiment he came across, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Miller's 1st Minnesota, then ordered Burns' other two regiments to go to their commander's aid.⁵³

Sections of four different batteries had been rushed to the field and Miller's Minnesotans advanced through the clearing with shot and shell whistling over their heads as the Union artillerists suppressed their rebel counterparts beyond and to either side of the woods to Burns' front. Burns ordered Miller to take position on the left of the 106th, with his own left flank refused across the Williamsburg Road, covering against any flanking maneuver attempted by Confederates on the other side. Equally concerned about potential enemy moves north of the railroad, Burns sidled the 72nd down the line until its right flank touched the railbed, opening a significant gap between that regiment and the 106th in the center of the line. The dispositions left both his flanks in the air in addition to the dangerous gap in his center, yet there was little else Burns could do except hold on and wait for more reinforcements. Even as he completed these adjustments, sometime during the 5:00 o'clock hour, firing erupted in the woods to his front between his skirmishers and the advancing Confederates. Moments later, the front

ranks of three regiments of South Carolina infantry burst forth from the tree-line, aimed directly at the gap.⁵⁴

Burns raced to the threatened point as the opposing troops, not even twenty-five paces apart, leveled muskets and loosed volleys into each other's massed ranks. "The battle raged along the whole line," Burns recalled, "[concentrating] gradually toward my two weak points, the center and the Williamsburg road."⁵⁵ Momentarily checked by the daunting fire of the Pennsylvanians, the Confederates gathered themselves and charged into the open seam between the 72nd and the 106th. With the short distance between the two sides, there was little time for Burns or any of the other Yankee soldiers to react. Burns, standing just behind his line, was struck in the right cheek by a minie ball. Unfazed, the brigadier bandaged the wound with the silk handkerchief he always wore about his neck to ward off chills and continued on, "his beard and clothes clotted with blood; still he encouraged his officers and men" to hold the line.⁵⁶

At nearly the same time, Confederate fire killed the captain of the left-most company of the 72nd; leaderless, the unit fell back in the face of hand-to-hand fighting, further opening the gap in Burns' line. With their own right flank under pressure and now uncovered, the 106th also fell back across the fence towards the eastern side of the clearing. It seemed that the Philadelphia Brigade, despite the exhortations of their bloodstained commander, was coming apart at the seams. Men from the 2nd and 3rd South Carolina regiments reached the fence and "flaunted their flag across the rails," preparing to pursue the fleeing Yankees. Then good fortune intervened on the side of the Federals.⁵⁷

As the fighting broke out in the center of Burns' line, Lieutenant Colonel Miller of the 1st Minnesota could see Confederates from Brigadier General Paul J. Semmes' brigade advancing south of the Williamsburg Road. Miller moved his regiment up to be even with the rest of Burns' line and refused his left flank across the road. This move protected Burns' left and forced the Confederates to work their way through the thick woods south of the road looking to get behind Miller's left. As Burns' line was falling back, Semmes ran headlong into the Vermont regiments of Brigadier General W. T. H. Brooks' brigade, from William Franklin's Sixth Corps. A vicious firefight erupted between the two brigades.⁵⁸

The sudden gunfire behind their right flank distracted the South Carolina regiments attacking Burns. Already taking losses from the Union artillery, and prevented by the wooded terrain from seeing what was happening to their right, the Confederates hesitated, declining to pursue the retreating Pennsylvanians across the clearing. Mysterious orders to stop firing were repeated down the line. These orders had no clear source and the rebel officers debated whether or not to give them any weight. Confusion reigned for precious minutes and eventually two of the three attacking regiments pulled back into the trees, leaving their more stubborn comrades alone and exposed at the fence near the road.⁵⁹

Burns was not slow in capitalizing on this respite. He regrouped the 72nd and the 106th, then started taking advantage of the reinforcements now arriving in the form of individual regiments forwarded by Sumner as he came across them. Seeing the trouble facing the 1st Minnesota on the left, Burns sent his own 69th Pennsylvania Volunteers to

support their left flank. As he organized a counterattack towards the fence, Burns spotted the 88th New York moving up the road at the double-quick; fired up by a speech from Sumner before he sent them off, this Irish regiment was just looking for someone to charge. Wisely, Burns pointed out the lone Confederate regiment up by the fence and got out of the way. The New Yorkers drove the last rebels from the fence and chased them into the woods, effectively ending the fighting north of the road. “Victory,” Burns reported, “can fairly be claimed by us.”⁶⁰

Perhaps Burns’ most important contribution at Savage Station was to counterbalance the ineptness shown by Sumner in managing the battle. Even with Heintzelman’s departure, Sumner outnumbered Magruder, and he had Franklin close by for support. Instead of marshalling his brigades for a counterstroke to cripple the Army of the Potomac’s closest pursuer, Sumner haphazardly threw single regiments in Burns’ direction, leaving the bulk of his command unengaged. Fortunately for Sumner, Burns proved to be a steady hand in a crisis. Even under great duress he maintained his composure and the hard work put into drilling his troops since he assumed command prevented a repeat of Ball’s Bluff after their line was pierced. Sedgwick praised his subordinate’s “great daring and excellent judgement in the disposition of his troops.”⁶¹

After dark the Philadelphia Brigade joined the rest of Sumner’s corps in continuing the retreat towards White Oak Swamp. Burns’ hard-won victory at Savage Station was rendered hollow when the haste of their retreat forced the abandonment of a hospital established at Savage Station earlier in the campaign. Over 3,000 men were left to become Confederate prisoners, including many from the Philadelphia Brigade who

fell during that day's fighting. Heartsick, the brigadier "mourned the necessity of leaving behind so many brave men, wounded and dying, who had done so well in the fight."⁶²

By mid-morning the Army of the Potomac had made its escape through White Oak Swamp. Lee focused his efforts on concentrating the bulk of his army for a strike at Glendale, a strategically located crossroads town. McClellan's army was stretched out along the road running south through Glendale to Malverton. A breakthrough at the crossroads would split the Union army in two and present an opportunity for Lee to destroy the segment isolated between Glendale and White Oak Swamp. McClellan recognized that danger and distributed his troops in defensive positions to the north and west of Glendale in order to keep the roads open for his supply train and the troops moving south from White Oak Swamp. Making what could have been a disastrous choice, McClellan posted Brigadier General George McCall's Pennsylvania division to guard the Long Bridge Road, the most convenient point of approach for Longstreet's Confederates coming from west of Glendale; McCall's division had taken a beating at Gaines' Mill three days prior.⁶³

Lee's complex plan involved attacks from several different directions, most significantly a holding attack by Jackson coming from the north through White Oak Swamp and the main blow coming from the west at the hands of James Longstreet. Following what had become a pattern throughout the campaign, this plan fell apart when the generals involved failed to coordinate, Jackson in particular failing to do anything other than conduct an artillery duel early in the afternoon. Feeling a sense of urgency as

he watched his opportunity slip away, Lee ordered Longstreet to attack on his own. Longstreet moved forward directly into McCall. In under an hour of fierce fighting the Confederate attack wrecked McCall's division and opened a gaping hole in the center of the line defending Glendale. The Army of the Potomac was in grave danger.⁶⁴

Sedgwick's division was posted outside Glendale as an area reserve. Sumner's other divisions were already positioned near White Oak Swamp to guard against the threat of Jackson. The corps commander responded to Jackson's limited movement earlier in the day by releasing two of Sedgwick's brigades to support the defenses in that direction, leaving Burns' brigade as the nearest reserve to the point of Longstreet's attack. Unfortunately for Burns, Sumner stayed at Glendale with the Philadelphia Brigade. When the shooting started, the veteran corps commander found himself with nothing better to do than personally supervise the movements of the one brigade he had on hand. Responding to urgent requests for reinforcements from Brigadier General Joe Hooker, whose division held the line to the left of McCall, Sumner scattered Burns' regiments. Two went to Hooker and Burns was directed to take the 72nd to the aid of the remnants of McCall's division still desperately trying to hold their position.⁶⁵

Burns' men proved capable of performing admirably even without the presence of their brigade commander. Hooker directed the 69th, commanded by Colonel Joshua Owen, to fill the gap between his right and McCall's left. Only moments after they arrived, the remainder of McCall's division broke for good, abandoning their artillery as they scattered in the face of a determined Confederate attack and fled through the ranks of the 69th. After firing a volley to slow down the onrushing rebels, Owen gave the

order to fix bayonets. “Heroically led by Owen,” Hooker reported, “[the 69th] advanced in the open field . . . with almost reckless daring.”⁶⁶ Owen’s charge drove the Confederates back across the field and recaptured McCall’s guns. Burns’ pride shows through in his report with the exuberant exclamation: “Gallant Sixty-ninth!”⁶⁷

Near the other end of McCall’s line, Burns was also trying to deal with the sudden collapse. Sedgwick’s other brigades were now on the scene and Burns received four regiments, including his own 71st Pennsylvania, to reinforce his position. Another Confederate attack routed two regiments fighting to Burns’ left, exposing the all-important road through another gap in the Union line. Burns quickly filled the breach with the 71st Pennsylvania and the 19th Massachusetts, reporting later that “these two noble regiments met the enemy face to face, and for nearly one hour poured into them such tremendous volleys that no further attack was had at that vital point.”⁶⁸ In the meantime, Burns chased the two fleeing regiments and “rode into their midst, and by his appeals to their pride succeeded in stopping their retreat and turning their faces again towards the enemy.”⁶⁹ With his line stabilized, Burns held there until darkness fell and ended the fighting.

Burns again proved his worth during the battle of Glendale. Sumner listed him among a handful of officers to whom “the country is indebted for very important services in this action.”⁷⁰ The Philadelphia Brigade’s historian recorded that “General Burns won the highest praise and the enthusiastic admiration of his men” at Glendale.⁷¹ Burns cut a dramatic figure during the fighting: “Wherever the fight seemed to be the hottest, there was Burns with his face stained with blood, cheering and rallying the

men.”⁷² Even a painful fall from his horse while attempting to jump a ditch could not slow down the feisty Ohioan.⁷³ The commissary captain had become quite the warrior general, building a record that compared favorably with any other brigade commander in the Army of the Potomac.

Burns’ role in this campaign essentially ended after the battle of Glendale. With the road uncut, McClellan was able to pull his troops in behind a formidable defensive line established at Malvern Hill, outside Malverton. Lee’s frontal attack against that position the next day resulted only in the pointless slaughter of Confederate soldiers, bringing his pursuit of the Union army to a close. Other than some long-range artillery fire that killed two of his men, Burns and his brigade were mostly observers during the battle of Malvern Hill. A week later, Burns finally fell victim to “[his] wound, malaria, and twenty-eight days of constant strain.”⁷⁴ His facial wound grew infected, and Burns was ordered back to Philadelphia to recuperate.⁷⁵

Burns demonstrated himself to be a valuable asset to the Army of the Potomac during the Peninsular Campaign. He was a steady hand in the field, unfazed by moments of crisis, responding quickly and intelligently to each emergency. Perhaps more importantly, his thorough training of the Philadelphia Brigade and emphasis on discipline paid off; the men of the brigade did not break, even under extreme stress. Their retreat under duress at Savage Station bore no resemblance to the rout at Ball’s Bluff. They regrouped at the first possible moment and maintained their combat effectiveness. Their 405 casualties, including 40 killed, could have been far worse had the bonds of discipline slacked at any point during the Seven Days. It is to Burns’ great

credit that he left his brigade in immeasurably better shape than that in which he found it eight months before. His star was on the rise.⁷⁶

Endnotes

- ¹ Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 40; Lash, “*Duty Well Done*”, 146.
- ² Burns, quoted in Lash, “*Duty Well Done*”, 146.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.; Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment*, 12; Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 41.
- ⁵ Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 43-44.
- ⁶ Charles H. Banes, *History of the Philadelphia Brigade* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1876), 34.
- ⁷ Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 49.
- ⁸ Robertson, *Stonewall Jackson*, 313-314.
- ⁹ R. B. Marcy to General Sedgwick, February 21, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 107, p. 538.
- ¹⁰ Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 50-54.
- ¹¹ Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment*, 27.
- ¹² Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 50.
- ¹³ Sears, *McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 136-137.
- ¹⁴ Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 18.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 18-19; Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 56-58.
- ¹⁶ Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 34-36; Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 58-59.
- ¹⁷ Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 60.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.; Banes, *Philadelphia Brigade*, 51.
- ¹⁹ Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 37-39; Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 62.
- ²⁰ Lash, “*Duty Well Done*”, 187; Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 62-63.
- ²¹ Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 62-63; Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 54.
- ²² Burns, “General Orders No. 13,” Burns Papers, TAMU; Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 63.
- ²³ Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 61; Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 66.

- ²⁴ Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 61-62.
- ²⁵ Lash, "Duty Well Done", 192.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 193-194; Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 69-71.
- ²⁷ Jack D. Welsh, *Medical Histories of Union Generals* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997), 45.
- ²⁸ Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 117-120.
- ²⁹ Lash, "Duty Well Done", 203-204; Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 124; Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 72.
- ³⁰ Lash, "Duty Well Done", 204; Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 73; Report of Brig. Gen. William W. Burns, June 3, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:1, p. 806.
- ³¹ Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 73; Lash, "Duty Well Done", 204-205; Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 136; Report of Col. C. H. Tompkins, June 4, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:1, p. 794.
- ³² Lash, "Duty Well Done", 205-207; Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 136.
- ³³ Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 135; Lash, "Duty Well Done", 297; Report of Brig. Gen. John Sedgwick, June 4, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:1, p. 791-792.
- ³⁴ Banes, *Philadelphia Brigade*, 67.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Report of Burns, June 3, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:1, p. 806; Report of Sedgwick, June 4, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:1, p. 792.
- ³⁷ Report of Sedgwick, June 4, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:1, p. 792.
- ³⁸ Report of Lt. Edmund Kirby, June 4, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:1, p. 795.
- ³⁹ Report of Sedgwick, June 4, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:1, p. 792.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Report of Burns, June 3, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:1, p. 807.
- ⁴² Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment*, 67.
- ⁴³ Report of Burns, June 3, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:1, p. 807; Lash, "Duty Well Done", 212-213.
- ⁴⁴ Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment*, 72.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.; Lash, "Duty Well Done", 218-222.

⁴⁶ Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 209-211; Sears, *McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 212-214; Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 79-81.

⁴⁷ Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 82-83.

⁴⁸ Report of Brig. Gen. William W. Burns, July 5, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 90-91; Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 187-190; Lash, "Duty Well Done", 228-229.

⁴⁹ Report of Burns, July 5, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 91; Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 190-191; Lash, "Duty Well Done", 230. Some secondary sources put the California Regiment's casualties at Allen's Farm at 96. This number, unsupported by any official reports, seems far too high. Such a total would have been comparable to the severe losses suffered by this regiment at Antietam and Gettysburg, scenes of far heavier fighting. Such high losses within a single regiment would have drawn more attention from the battle's participants. The origin of the higher figure is unclear.

⁵⁰ Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 203; Report of Burns, July 5, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 91; Lash, "Duty Well Done", 230-232; Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett*, 84-85.

⁵¹ Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 213-214; Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 270; Report of Burns, July 5, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 91.

⁵² Banes, *Philadelphia Brigade*, 79.

⁵³ Ibid.; Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 217; William B. Franklin, "Rear-Guard Fighting during the Change of Base," in Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (New York: Century Co., 1887, reprint, Thomas Yoseloff, 1956), 2:374.

⁵⁴ Report of Lt. Col. Stephen Miller, July 5, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 108; Report of Burns, July 5, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 91; Lash, "Duty Well Done", 232; Report of Brig. Gen. J. B. Kershaw, July 14, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 726-727.

⁵⁵ Report of Burns, July 5, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 91.

⁵⁶ Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment*, 61 (quotation); Report of Col. James D. Nance, July 11, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 735; Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 217; Report of Burns, July 5, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 91; Lash, "Duty Well Done", 232-233.

⁵⁷ Report of Burns, July 5, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 91 (quotation); Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 217.

⁵⁸ Report of Miller, July 5, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 108; Report of Brig. Gen. Paul J. Semmes, July 4, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 721; Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 217-218.

⁵⁹ Report of Maj. P. Gaillard, July 12, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 733; Report of Nance, July 11, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 735.

⁶⁰ Report of Burns, July 5, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 91-92; Lash, "Duty Well Done", 233; Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 271.

- ⁶¹ Report of Brig. Gen. John Sedgwick, July 5, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 82; Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 223.
- ⁶² Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment*, 61; Lash, "Duty Well Done", 233-234.
- ⁶³ Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 240-241; Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 279.
- ⁶⁴ Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 293-299.
- ⁶⁵ Report of Burns, July 5, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 92.
- ⁶⁶ Report of Brig. Gen. Joseph Hooker, July 15, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 111.
- ⁶⁷ Report of Burns, July 5, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 92.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁹ Banes, *Philadelphia Brigade*, 86.
- ⁷⁰ Report of Brig. Gen. Edwin V. Sumner, July 4, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 51.
- ⁷¹ Banes, *Philadelphia Brigade*, 86.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*
- ⁷³ Welsh, *Medical Histories*, p. 45.
- ⁷⁴ Franklin, "Rear-Guard Fighting," *Battles and Leaders*, 2:374.
- ⁷⁵ Report of Burns, July 5, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 93.
- ⁷⁶ Organization of Troops and Return of Casualties, June 25-July 2, 1862, *O. R.* Ser. 1, Vol. 11:2, p. 25.

CHAPTER IV

FALL FROM GRACE

A hard recuperation awaited Burns in Philadelphia. His facial wound would not close properly, forcing Burns to endure the agony of having the wound cauterized every other day at first, tapering off to twice a week until the gash that the minie ball left in his cheek finally healed. Recovering from this treatment and a case of malaria required many more weeks of rest. It was October before Burns was ready to resume command.¹

Burns found the Philadelphia Brigade at Harpers Ferry on October 9, where the Army of the Potomac rested in the wake of the Antietam campaign. It must have pained Burns to discover how many faces were missing. Sedgwick's division had been mauled during the battle of Antietam and the Philadelphia Brigade had taken its share of the losses. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the men of the brigade were overjoyed to have their old commander back. They turned out to greet him that afternoon with cheers and applause, moving Burns to the point that he trusted his voice only long enough to ask, "How do you do, men?"²

This reunion was short-lived. Burns' strong performance during the Peninsular Campaign had not gone unnoticed among the upper echelons of the Army of the Potomac. Sedgwick, writing to Sumner, praised "the gallantry of Brigadier General Burns, and respectfully submit that a grade [promotion] is but a small recompense for his services."³ Sumner agreed, forwarding Sedgwick's recommendation on to McClellan. The army commander, who had always thought well of Burns, was lavish in his own praise: "[Generals Sedgwick and Sumner] have not over-rated the importance of the

services provided by General Burns . . . [his conduct] was something more than that display of gallantry which every brigade commander ought to possess.”⁴ On November 2, less than a month after his return, Burns was relieved of command of the Philadelphia Brigade and ordered to report to Major General Ambrose Burnside to become a division commander in his Ninth Corps. Burns assumed his new post with the First Division a few days later.⁵

In sharp contrast to the hard feelings created among his soldiers when he first took command of the Philadelphia Brigade, Burns’ departure provoked an outpouring of “regrets at parting so brave and sterling a soldier.”⁶ The stern Regular Army officer was now “regarded with the affections due to a parent, for he had . . . brought us all to a perfect state of discipline, and to him we owe most of our military education; there were none of his old command who did not feel that he had won his promotion, and that he would rise to a still higher grade, as all felt sure that his abilities greatly exceeded his new position.”⁷ As he left the camp, after turning over command to one of his colonels, the entire brigade, drawn up in line, greeted Burns. He rode down the line, receiving the well wishes of his men, stopping in front of the 69th to say, “Men, always do your duty as well as you have done and you will always be victorious. Good bye.”⁸ Then, buoyed by three cheers, Burns set off down the road to greater things.

His new unit was happy to have the services of the feisty Ohioan. Burns was given First Division, replacing Brigadier General Orlando B. Willcox, now acting commander of the Ninth Corps after McClellan was relieved and Burnside promoted to take his place as commander of Army of the Potomac. Writing to his wife the day after

Burns arrived, Willcox, who had known Burns at West Point, spoke of being “very glad to have [him].”⁹ Elaborating on the subject in a letter written two weeks later, Willcox explained that Burns “is one of my classmates & a first rate soldier. Every thing works smoothly & well in the division.”¹⁰ It seemed fortunate that this was so, for Burns and his division would find themselves standing on the north bank of the Rappahannock River three weeks later, waiting to cross along with the rest of the Army of the Potomac to assault Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia at Fredericksburg.

McClellan was relieved due to a lack of aggressiveness, an attribute not lacking in Burnside. The new commander immediately set in motion a design for a decisive thrust at Richmond. Fredericksburg was the key to Burnside’s plan, a strategically located crossing point on the lower Rappahannock. Lee’s army was widely separated in early November, with Longstreet’s corps guarding crossings along the upper Rappahannock and Jackson’s corps protecting the Shenandoah Valley. Burnside intended to hold Longstreet with a demonstration while the bulk of his army marched the thirty-six miles to Fredericksburg and crossed the river before the Confederates could react.¹¹

Burnside’s plan seemed to work at first. Lead elements of the Army of the Potomac arrived at Fredericksburg on November 17, so far ahead of any Confederate response that Lee initially conceded the crossing, planning to make a stand farther south. Unfortunately for the Union commander, the lower Rappahannock had been rendered unfordable by heavy rains. Burnside’s plan anticipated this, calling for pontoon bridges to meet his army at Fredericksburg for an immediate crossing. A combination of bad

luck and incompetence caused the pontoons to be delayed, not arriving until November 25, by which time Lee and Longstreet were waiting for Burnside on the imposing heights across the river. Frustrated, Burnside wasted two more weeks searching for alternatives to his original plan, finally announcing on December 9 that the army would cross at Fredericksburg after all. The crossing took time, and Burnside was not prepared to attack Lee until December 13, with the Army of Northern Virginia reunited to oppose him.¹²

Willcox's Ninth Corps was now part of Edwin Sumner's Right Grand Division after Burnside's reorganization of the Army of the Potomac prior to this campaign. Burns' division started the battle on the left end of Sumner's line, maintaining the link between Sumner's Grand Division and Major General William B. Franklin's Left Grand Division, with orders to respond to Franklin "if called upon."¹³ Franklin made a half-hearted attack on "Stonewall" Jackson's half of the Confederate line, then, fearing a counterattack, called on Burns around 3:00 p.m. to shift further left to cover the pontoon bridge behind his sector of the Union line. Here Burns spent the remainder of the 13th, Franklin later explaining that "it would have been imprudent to have taken [his division] away."¹⁴ In this Burns was fortunate; Franklin's decision quite possibly spared his division from joining the futile assaults against Longstreet's entrenchments on Mayre's Heights. As it was, Burns' division incurred only a handful of losses from long-range artillery and sniper fire: two killed, forty-three wounded, and three captured during the battle.¹⁵ As historian George C. Rable notes, the worst experience of the day for Burns

and his men was watching the distant slaughter on Mayre's Heights and dealing with the growing fear that they might be called upon to make the next attempt.¹⁶

Burnside's bloody failure on the 13th did not immediately dissuade him from resuming the attack on the 14th. Ninth Corps, having survived the 13th relatively intact, was ordered to prepare for a new assault to take place the next morning. Burns viewed the prospects of such an attack realistically, remarking to Willcox that he "expected to go as far towards the stone wall as any, but as a general he was bound to say that he . . . considered this attack with one corps of twelve thousand men murder and not war."¹⁷ However, Burns' luck held, and Burnside canceled the attack after his subordinates, especially Sumner, objected to continuing the slaughter. Burnside withdrew the Army of the Potomac back across the Rappahannock on the night of December 15, ending the short campaign. Fredericksburg was a disaster, but Burns proved to be capable as a division commander and his star remained untarnished.¹⁸

William S. Rosecrans, now a major general commanding the Army of the Cumberland, in East Tennessee, had been pleading with Major General Henry W. Halleck, general-in-chief of all Union armies, for talented generals to be sent his way since at least November. His calls intensified in early January, 1863, in the aftermath of the battle of Murfreesboro, a near-defeat during which Rosecrans had found some of his subordinates wanting. He complained to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton that his army was "very short of general officers," and implored Halleck to send him "one, two, or three good division commanders."¹⁹ Having been turned down in some of his requests for specific generals, Rosecrans focused on a new target: Burns. On January 24 he

wrote Burns, "I have telegraphed General Halleck asking if you can be spared to be assigned to this department. Would such an arrangement suit you?"²⁰ Rosecrans initial request had been denied by Burnside, who considered Burns too valuable to lose and had him earmarked for a future corps command. The issue seemed decided until, also on the 24th, Joseph Hooker replaced Burnside in command of the Army of the Potomac.²¹

Hoping to placate Rosecrans, Halleck wired him on the 28th, reluctantly granting that, "If General Hooker will consent, you shall have General Burns. You already have your full share of the best officers."²² However, Hooker as well declined at first to part with Burns, explaining that "he had too few fighting generals now."²³ Stymied twice, it took one more turn of events to free Burns to go west: Ninth Corps was detached from the Army of the Potomac. With Burns leaving his command anyway, Hooker consented to the transfer. On February 2, Hooker issued the order for "Brigadier General William W. Burns, U. S. Volunteers, at the earnest request of General Rosecrans, is relieved from duty with the Ninth Corps," to report to the Army of the Cumberland.²⁴

Burns believed that Rosecrans wanted him to take over the corps commanded by Major General Alexander M. McCook. An unpopular self-promoter, McCook had not distinguished himself during the battle of Murfreesboro; his corps suffering heavily at the hands of the Confederate surprise attack that opened the fight. If this was Rosecrans' intention, he must have communicated it privately to Burns. None of his official requests mention anything other than his desire for more competent brigade and division commanders. A statement by Rosecrans made in support of Burns to the House of Representatives after the war expressed only his desire for Burns' "services," not

mentioning in what capacity.²⁵ It is certainly possible that Rosecrans and Burns had a private understanding of what his role would be, but it is noteworthy in light of the events that would follow that Rosecrans never officially made clear his plans for Burns.²⁶

Burns' departure from the Army of the Potomac did not go unnoticed. On the same day he received his orders, Burns was the recipient of an extraordinary gift from members of his old command, the Philadelphia Brigade:

On February 7th, the Seventy-Second Regiment presented General W. W. Burns, their former brigade commander, with a magnificent sword, sash and belt costing over six hundred dollars, on the eve of his departure for the west. It possessed peculiar interest from the fact that it was entirely a gift of the rank and file, and the presentation speech was made by Sergeant Faber, of Company I, on behalf of the *non-commissioned officers and privates* [emphasis in original]. General Burns received it, replying gratefully and briefly, saying that he came as a stranger to succeed Colonel Baker, whom we had all learned to idolize. "A brilliant orator, a Senator, a man whose personal attractions won all hearts," and he being only a soldier how hard it was for him to gain our confidence and love; thanking them for the gift, he closed as follows:

"I am no longer your general, but will always be your friend and proud of your success. I came to the Army of the Potomac at the instance of General McClellan. Burnside and Hooker are my friends. I leave with a

sad heart, but Rosecrans wants me in the West, there the star of my destiny directs me. Farewell. God bless you.”

The sword was one of rare beauty and great costliness, the blade pure Damascus, the handle a fine specimen of work in gold, diamonds, amethyst, turquoise, and other precious stones, having forty-one diamonds in the letters W. W. B. and U. S.; on the scabbard in gold bas-relief was an equestrian representation of General Burns leading his men, the coat of arms of Pennsylvania, a camp scene and a battle scene; certainly a magnificent souvenir.²⁷

According to such a testimonial, Burns left the Army of the Potomac far more popular with the men who served him than when he arrived. He headed west full of confidence in his own ability and in that path which the star of his destiny illuminated, alive with the possibility of greater glory and rapid advancement.

Working under the assumption that he would be elevated to a corps command, Burns considered it a priority to make sure he headed west as a major general, the necessary rank for such a post. Burnside told Burns that he had been appointed a major general on November 29, 1862, pending confirmation by the Senate at some point during the current session. With this in mind, Burns followed the example of many of his colleagues and attempted to cultivate some political allies. He wrote to Senator John Sherman, Republican of Ohio, in early January, asking him to bring his name up before that body for confirmation. Sounding somewhat confused by Burns’ appeal, Sherman replied, “From the high merit as a soldier attributed to you on all hands I will cheerfully ask your appointment as Major General—but I think General Burnside is mistaken in

supposing any weight will be attached to a recommendation of a Senator. Such is not my experience.”²⁸ Not reassured by this exchange, Burns’ first destination after leaving the Army of the Potomac was Washington, D.C., where he intended to make sure he got his commission before Congress adjourned on March 4.²⁹

Burns started at the Adjutant General’s office, learning from Assistant Adjutant General James B. Fry that his appointment to major general had been withdrawn. In alarm, Burns went straight to the White House, where Lincoln seemed cooperative. The President handed Burns a note to be shown to Stanton and Halleck, stating that he was “very willing” for Burns to become a major general if Stanton and Halleck saw “no valid objection.”³⁰ From there Burns took his note to the War Department, where Halleck “declined to make any endorsement saying that he had already recommended me and others and that politicians interfered and rendered his recommendations [pointless].”³¹ With Halleck washing his hands of further involvement, Burns continued his quest to Stanton’s office.³²

Burns found the Secretary of War to appear quite accommodating. In reassuring tones, Stanton told the general that his appointment had not been withdrawn; he claimed to have the paperwork there in his office and proceeded to search for it as Halleck entered the room. Unsuccessful in his search, Stanton looked up at Halleck and asked, “we made General Burns a Major General did we not?”³³ Halleck answered in the affirmative and Stanton proceeded to write up a new order for Burns’ appointment to major general, back-dating it to November 29, 1862. Handing the paper to Burns, the secretary showered him with more assurances that his new rank would take effect “from

tomorrow and you can rest satisfied.”³⁴ Burns took his appointment down to the adjutant general’s office and watched it be recorded, but remained unconvinced that the matter was resolved.

His subsequent destinations were the offices of five of the seven members of the Senate Committee on Military Affairs. Burns knew that the list of appointees pending confirmation from this session of Congress was a long one and that there was no guarantee his name would come up. He urged the committee members to accommodate the request of General Rosecrans and make sure his own appointment was confirmed. According to Burns, he received the assurances of these men that his name would go through.³⁵

One last stop was added to his odyssey through the streets of Washington when he was sent for by Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, another leading Ohio Republican. Chase explained that he had received letters from Hooker and Rosecrans requesting support for Burns’ promotion; he expressed his own confidence in Burns and inquired about the status of his appointment. Burns explained that he now had “assurances from the President and Sec. of War as to my commission,” but he had concerns about “the possibility of my name not being sent [to the Senate].”³⁶ Chase countered with an alarming reply: “Stanton is deceiving you.”³⁷ He offered no explanation for his claim, but promised Burns he would see Lincoln in the morning about pushing the general’s confirmation through the Senate. Burns may have found no small comfort in this, for “Chase’s voice was influential in determining military appointments,” especially for Ohio men.³⁸ At that juncture, Burns evidently decided he

had done all he could to influence events. He left Washington and headed west on February 13.³⁹

It is interesting to note in light of what would follow that Burns approached mostly Republicans in his quest for political allies to support his promotion to major general. He likely drew a distinction between radicals such as Stanton and the members of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War and those Republicans he considered to be more moderate in their political positions. He also appears to have considered those politicians from his own home state to be more likely to help than others.

Congress adjourned as scheduled on March 4, by which time Burns was in Cincinnati, waiting for news of his promotion. A list was published of the thirty officers whose appointments to major general were confirmed by the Senate, with Burns' name nowhere to be found. Burns was outraged. From commanding a division and anticipating commanding a corps, the general now sat hundreds of miles from the fighting, without a command, fuming. His reassurances from Lincoln, Stanton, Chase, and the members of the Committee on Military Affairs had proven worthless. Burns felt betrayed, and he assigned responsibility for his torment to the target already illuminated for him by Chase: Edwin M. Stanton.⁴⁰

Burns was predisposed to see treachery in Stanton, for his politics and choice of friends set him at odds with the Secretary of War. Burns was a conservative Democrat whose parents were born in Virginia and whose wife was from Kentucky. He declared at the beginning of the war that he “[did] not feel animosity to the people who have thrown down the gauntlet of defiance to the government. I have no wish to see them

destroyed.”⁴¹ Like McClellan, Burns wanted only to preserve the Union and bring about a reconciliation between North and South, not to break the Southern aristocracy and free the slaves. His views on slavery are not recorded, but he was careful to point out that “hostility” between North and South “does exist aside from the question of slavery.”⁴²

Burns’ opinions mirrored those of other generals with Democratic sympathies, such as McClellan and Winfield S. Hancock, and Stanton found those opinions reprehensible. A prominent antebellum lawyer, the Secretary of War had transformed since 1860 from a long-time Democrat into an abolitionist, Radical Republican. Attorney General for the last months of the term of Lincoln’s predecessor, Democrat James Buchanan, Stanton was an advisor to and supporter of McClellan after the general was called to Washington in the aftermath of Bull Run. Stanton professed to share McClellan’s views on how the war should be conducted and had the general’s support when Lincoln, looking to appease Democrats in Congress, named him Secretary of War in January 1862. Following his appointment, perhaps because of the association with the largely Radical Republican members of Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War required by his new position, Stanton underwent a stunning transformation into one of the most radical of Radicals.⁴³

Stanton the Radical hated the South, hated its slave culture, aristocratic social structure, and the perceived arrogance with which southern politicians pushed the interests of their region. According to historian Bruce Tap, Stanton and his fellow Radicals argued that “the only hope for breaking the rebellion was to . . . crush the Slave Power and allow a reorganization of southern society according to the dynamic model of

northern free labor.”⁴⁴ To make matters worse, Stanton also despised West Pointers. He believed them “permeated with the ancient notions of war . . . unable to realize that this is a Republic, in which the people are above generals, instead of generals above the people.”⁴⁵ West Pointers, Radicals argued, were more interested in playing war by an archaic set of rules with their former friends than in winning the war against the enemy by any means necessary, evoking social change in the rebelling states in the process. In the view of Stanton’s biographers, there was no room in Stanton’s army for Democrats who “formed . . . centers in the Army for pockets of conservative sentiment regarding slavery.”⁴⁶ To Stanton’s way of thinking, a general’s political reliability was far more important than his military experience or demonstrated ability.⁴⁷

If Stanton disliked West Pointers in general, he saved particular venom for a specific Military Academy graduate: one-time friend George McClellan. McClellan epitomized the type, a conservative Democrat, soft on slavery, who spoke of reconciliation with the seceding states and seemed unwilling to take harsh measures against the rebels. The erstwhile allies clashed as the Secretary of War gravitated farther and farther away from the general’s views during McClellan’s time in command of the Army of the Potomac. Great disappointments on the Peninsula and during the Antietam campaign provided Stanton with the opportunity to convince Lincoln to replace McClellan with Ambrose Burnside. Having become an ardent Radical, the Secretary of War could never tolerate a general he believed “felt just as pleasantly toward the enemy in front of him as he would if he had been on the other side.”⁴⁸

Even worse, from Stanton's new point of view, McClellan was a charismatic conservative Democrat who cultivated a coterie of like-minded officers within the Army of the Potomac. Burns was part of this clique, a young officer who caught McClellan's eye back in Ohio in 1861 and had proved himself after being given an opportunity to succeed. Burns described his "heartfelt desolation" at the time of McClellan's removal, holding "true to the conviction that . . . McClellan is the only man who can save this country from permanent disruption and our army from disaster."⁴⁹ His devotion to McClellan achieved a religious purity, inspiring Burns to declare that "God in his wisdom . . . choses [sic] instruments among us to carry out his will . . . I believe that the characteristics of Geo. B. McClellan make him the fitting instrument to conquer this Rebellion and save this nation."⁵⁰ Burns surely was aware, as Stanton's biographers put it, that "the generals who ran afoul of [Stanton] . . . had shown too much . . . Democratic partisanship."⁵¹ Given these irreconcilable philosophical differences with Stanton, it seemed logical to Burns that the Secretary of War was his betrayer.⁵²

Believing there was no relief to be found at the War Department, in March 1863 Burns decided to appeal directly to the President. Typical of a nineteenth century officer when a slight was perceived, he chose a letter of resignation as his method, explaining later that, "Held up to the eyes of the Army . . . as a conspicuous object of . . . sleight . . . He had no honorable alternative than to ask an explanation of the President of the cause, demand a Court of Inquiry, if a cause, or tender his resignation if no cause."⁵³ Making liberal use of melodramatic flourishes, especially in regards to the state of his

health, Burns threw himself upon Lincoln's mercy in a letter of resignation dated March 6:

I have the honor to tender the resignation of my Commission of Brigadier General of Volunteers, my reasons are the most powerful that a soldier can offer, viz, want of confidence in my ability. I am awakened to this painful fact by the very palpable decision of those empowered to judge who have set me aside in promotion for merit. After my trial of fifteen year service, I might consider that I was still thought capable to assume command of a Brigade, but the humiliation has so broken my military spirit and my health, that now I'm ashamed and unable to assume command over men again. My want of self-reliance would involve disaster, and I will not hazard [sic] the lives of brave men who would distrust me and fail. I can serve my country more effectively, without shame, in the subsistence department. It may be that my loyalty is impugned, in these times of suspicion . . . I would gladly avail myself of the privilege of the laws and demand a Court of Inquiry. I will await your decision at Dayton, Ohio.⁵⁴

Burns' hopes of executive intervention were dashed when Lincoln accepted his resignation without comment.⁵⁵

Was Burns the victim of ill will on the part of Secretary Stanton? Could this have been the desired result of a sinister plot? Stanton had certainly not proven averse to removing other generals whom he considered untrustworthy. On January 21, 1863, Fitz John Porter, a McClellan favorite, was found guilty by a court-martial of "failure to obey lawful orders, and misbehavior before the enemy" for his failure to support Major

General John Pope at the battle of Second Manassas.⁵⁶ While Porter deserved censure for his actions during that fight, according to historian Stephen Sears his real crime was to be “the highly visible representation of McClellanism, the disease the general’s detractors defined as bad blood and paralysis infecting much of the officer corps of the Army of the Potomac.”⁵⁷

Four days after Porter’s conviction, Burnside was removed from command, not only because of a loss of confidence in his ability after Fredericksburg, but because his authority was undermined by a group of his subordinates who wished to see McClellan’s triumphant return. General William Franklin led this effort, and he was relieved of his command on the same day as Burnside. While Franklin’s removal was well deserved, Stanton’s biographers point out that “it was widely rumored that other ‘McClellanite’ officers were destined for similar treatment.”⁵⁸ Indeed, Republican suspicions regarding the political reliability of the Army of the Potomac’s generals seemed confirmed, provoking Radical congressmen to begin “what amounted to a campaign of extermination against Democratic generals,” with Stanton’s enthusiastic support.⁵⁹ For his part, Lincoln “made no serious effort to soften the blows which rained down . . . upon the heads of McClellan’s friends in the Army.”⁶⁰ Against this background, it becomes easier to see how Burns could imagine duplicity on the part of Stanton.

Interestingly, there are examples of Stanton intervening on the behalf of officers who believed themselves wronged on some account. Responding to a letter of resignation from a state militia captain, disappointed that he had lost his post as provost marshal for the Allegheny District due to a new rule implemented by Lincoln requiring

such posts to be filled by higher ranking officers, Stanton wrote, “In view of your services during the war, and my personal confidence in your ability . . . I am reluctant to have you leave the service,” and that “another arrangement . . . can be made.”⁶¹ It is odd, barring a request from a political ally, that the Secretary of War would make an effort to dissuade a captain from resigning but would not do so for a general with Burns’ record.

This evidence is circumstantial, proving nothing except that Burns’ resignation generated a high degree of apathy at the War Department, given significance only by the knowledge of Stanton’s attacks upon those with political leanings similar to Burns and Chase’s mysterious warning. There is no hard evidence to support Burns’ accusations against the Secretary of War, to the contrary, logic argues against a conspiracy designed to remove the general. Stanton was a busy man; it is difficult to imagine when he had time to devise a plan to rid the field of a relatively low-profile general. Burns idolized McClellan, but there is no reason to believe that the Secretary knew that; Stanton does not appear to have had any prior interaction with Burns and, significantly, the general was not involved in the January revolt against Burnside. For his part, Chase was known to be resentful of Stanton for reducing his influence in military matters.⁶²

Burns was not the only nominee left disappointed when Congress adjourned that March. Responding to a question from Hooker, Stanton explained that the “limitation imposed by the Act of Congress upon the number of Brigadier and Major Generals required an apportionment among the several armies in the field.”⁶³ He considered it “inevitable” that “differences of opinion should exist as to the nominations made,” but

reassured Hooker that “the President exercised his best judgment with an anxious desire to do full justice to everyone . . . no one can have just ground of complaint.”⁶⁴ It is far more likely that Burns fell victim to a numbers issue than it is that his name was deliberately withdrawn at Stanton’s request.

If this conclusion is valid, it becomes apparent that Burns chose the wrong course of action in submitting his resignation. His friends advised him against such a move. Isaac Wistar, a former subordinate from the Philadelphia Brigade, wrote imploringly, “It is solely a feeling of affection and warm interest for you, that prompts me to write and beg you not to resign.”⁶⁵ Wistar’s counsel was reasonable and wise, but came too late: “The President may still appoint you during the recess, perhaps, very soon, when your confirmation at the next session will be certain. The war may last a long time yet, long enough for you to experience much regret at an irrevocable act.”⁶⁶

Burns’ response is not known, but he was not dissuaded from submitting his resignation. Historian Pieter Spierenburg writes of an “honor-and-shame culture”, in which men who are shamed have no alternative but to take whatever action necessary to restore their honor.⁶⁷ Historian Elliott Gorn defines honor as “an intensely social concept...[it] requires acknowledgement from others; it cannot exist in solitary conscience.”⁶⁸ Stanton’s betrayal, as Burns saw it, damaged the officer’s good name, harming his reputation and his career with the implication that he was not worthy of promotion. Historian Gerald Linderman explains that a soldier in that era “had to act so as to escape any imputation of dishonor.”⁶⁹ With his reputation among his peers at stake, Burns reacted in an extreme manner, which could explain the language in his

letter of resignation, florid and near-hysterical even by the standards of the day. He could not simply follow Wistar's advice and wait for the next opportunity, keeping in mind that he was far from the only officer waiting for a promotion. Caught in a swirling confluence of betrayal, disappointment, and outrage, Burns' discipline failed him when he needed it the most, allowing an emotional eruption at a moment that called for objective detachment.

Wistar's next letter reflects his frustration with his stubborn former commander: "Pardon me for supposing that you 'regulars' get so accustomed to the rights of 'seniority' that you treat violation of it with too much seriousness."⁷⁰ Furthermore, "I know that Mr. Stanton is not inimical to you. He payed [sic] the greatest attention to your letter requesting me to be assigned to you – would not let my friend take it to the President, but insisted on doing it himself."⁷¹ Wistar closed his letter with one final plea: "Now my dear friend let me implore you one more time to rise above this hot feeling. Fix your eyes on the great future. It will vindicate you as well as some others of our friends. No man ever had an unimpeded flight to greatness."⁷² But Burns would not yield. His mistrust of the Secretary of War, inflamed by his wounded pride and his feelings of shame, prevented him from seeing anything but Stanton, the antagonist of his friends.

Burns likely sealed his fate with the histrionic tone of his letter of resignation as a volunteer officer. Claiming that "the humiliation has so broken my military spirit and my health, that now I'm ashamed and unable to assume command over men again," was not the best phrasing to convince Lincoln and Stanton that his promotion deserved more

consideration and that he was healthy enough to withstand the rigors of leading a corps on campaign.⁷³ No further field command would be forthcoming to a general who declared that his “want of self-reliance would involve disaster, and I will not hazard [sic] the lives of brave men who would distrust me and fail.”⁷⁴ This passage surely guaranteed that his resignation would be accepted. Lincoln and Stanton had dealt with too many other touchy, paranoid generals to placate yet another, less important one. Burns’ timing could not have been worse, given what had taken place in the Army of the Potomac that January. Compounding the error, Burns left the politicians the option of retaining his services in another important capacity by offering to return to the Commissary Department at his Regular Army rank. The general overplayed his hand and paid for it with his career. As an officer in the Regular Army, he returned to his former life as a major in the Commissary Department, sullenly serving out the war in obscurity in the Department of the Northwest.⁷⁵

Endnotes

- ¹ Welch, *Medical Histories*, 45.
- ² Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment*, 101.
- ³ Sedgwick, quoted in Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment*, 67.
- ⁴ McClellan, quoted in Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment*, 67.
- ⁵ Special Orders No. 309, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 19:2, p. 533.
- ⁶ Anthony W. McDermott and John E. Reilly, *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment, Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers* (Philadelphia: D. J. Gallagher and Co., 1889), 22.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment*, 103.
- ⁹ Orlando B. Willcox to Mrs. Willcox, November 5, 1862, *Forgotten Valor*, 377.
- ¹⁰ Willcox to Mrs. Willcox, November 20, 1862, *ibid.*, 394.
- ¹¹ Francis Augustin O'Reilly, *The Fredericksburg Campaign: Winter War on the Rappahannock* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 21.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 30-33, 44-53.
- ¹³ Report of Burns, December 17, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 21, p. 314.
- ¹⁴ Report of Maj. Gen. William B. Franklin, January 2, 1863, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 21, p. 451.
- ¹⁵ O'Reilly, *Fredericksburg Campaign*, 363; Return of casualties, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 21, p. 131-132.
- ¹⁶ George C. Rable, *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 523, n. 49.
- ¹⁷ William W. Burns, "Etat de Service in Command of Volunteer troops in war of Rebellion and Events", Burns Papers, TAMU.
- ¹⁸ Report of Brig. Gen. Orlando B. Willcox, January 7, 1863, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 21, p. 312; O'Reilly, *Fredericksburg Campaign*, 436.
- ¹⁹ Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, January 7, 1863, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 20:2, p. 306; Rosecrans to Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck, January 11, 1863, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 20:2, p. 317.
- ²⁰ Rosecrans to Burns, January 24, 1863, Burns Papers, TAMU.

- ²¹ Rosecrans to Halleck, November 8, 1862, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 20:2, p. 27; James Lee McDonough, *Stones River: Bloody Winter in Tennessee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), p. 110; William W. Burns, untitled document marked “Ca. 1865,” Burns Papers, TAMU.
- ²² Halleck to Rosecrans, January 28, 1863, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 23:2, p. 19.
- ²³ Burns, “Ca. 1865,” Burns Papers, TAMU.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*; Special Orders No. 38, February 7, 1863, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 25:2, p. 59.
- ²⁵ W. S. Rosecrans, quoted in William W. Burns, untitled document, November 10, 1883, Burns Papers, TAMU.
- ²⁶ Burns, “Ca. 1865,” Burns Papers, TAMU; McDonough, *Stones River*, 67.
- ²⁷ Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment*, 133.
- ²⁸ John Sherman to William W. Burns, January 14, 1863, Burns Papers, TAMU.
- ²⁹ William W. Burns to John Sherman, January 10, 1863, Burns Papers, TAMU; Burns, “Ca. 1865,” Burns Papers, TAMU.
- ³⁰ Lincoln, quoted in handwritten notation on Special Orders No. 38, February 7, 1863, Burns Papers, TAMU.
- ³¹ Burns, “Ca. 1865,” Burns Papers, TAMU.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Stanton, quoted in *ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ Burns, untitled document, November 10, 1883, Burns Papers, TAMU (first quote); Burns, “Ca. 1865,” Burns Papers, TAMU (second quote).
- ³⁷ Chase, quoted in Burns, untitled document, November 10, 1883, Burns Papers, TAMU.
- ³⁸ David Donald, ed., *Inside Lincoln’s Cabinet: The Civil War Dairies of Salmon P. Chase* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1954), 12.
- ³⁹ William W. Burns, untitled document, Burns Papers, TAMU.
- ⁴⁰ William W. Burns to A. Lincoln, March 6, 1863, Burns Papers, TAMU; Burns, untitled document, November 10, 1883, Burns Papers, TAMU.
- ⁴¹ William W. Burns to unknown, May 22, 1861, Burns Papers, TAMU.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Benjamin P. Thomas and Harold M. Hyman, *Stanton: The Life and Times of Lincoln's Secretary of War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 149.

⁴⁴ Bruce Tap, *Over Lincoln's Shoulder: The Committee on the Conduct of the War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 101.

⁴⁵ Edwin M. Stanton, quoted in Frank A. Flower, *Edwin McMasters Stanton: The Autocrat of Rebellion, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Akron, Ohio: Saalfield Publishing Company, 1905), 358.

⁴⁶ Thomas and Hyman, *Stanton*, 261.

⁴⁷ Tap, *Over Lincoln's Shoulder*, 2.

⁴⁸ George C. Gorham, *Life and Public Services of Edwin M. Stanton*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1899), 2: 19-20.

⁴⁹ William W. Burns to [Mrs. George B. McClellan], November 11, 1862, Burns Papers, TAMU.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Thomas and Hyman, *Stanton*, 261.

⁵² Stephen W. Sears, *Controversies and Commanders: Dispatches from the Army of the Potomac* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1999), 60.

⁵³ Burns, untitled document, Burns Papers, TAMU.

⁵⁴ Burns to Lincoln, March 6, 1863, Burns Papers, TAMU.

⁵⁵ Burns, untitled document, November 10, 1883, Burns Papers, TAMU.

⁵⁶ Sears, *Controversies and Commanders*, 67.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁸ Thomas and Hyman, *Stanton*, 261.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 259.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 262.

⁶¹ Edwin M. Stanton to Captain J. Foster, May 7, 1863, Edwin M. Stanton Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. (hereafter LOC).

⁶² Donald, ed., *Inside Lincoln's Cabinet*, 16.

⁶³ Edwin M. Stanton to Maj. Gen. J. Hooker, March 22, 1863, Stanton Papers, LOC.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Isaac J. Wistar to William W. Burns, March 14, 1863, Burns Papers, TAMU.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Pieter Spierenburg, ed. *Men and Violence: Gender, Honor, and Rituals in Modern Europe and America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 22.

⁶⁸ Elliott J. Gorn. "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review* 90 (February 1985), 39.

⁶⁹ Gerald E. Linderman. *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 12.

⁷⁰ Wistar to Burns, March 21, 1863, Burns Papers, TAMU.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Burns to Lincoln, March 6, 1863, Burns Papers, TAMU.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ General Orders No. 14, *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 22:2, p. 217.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

William Wallace Burns' tale is a cautionary one, a lesson in the dangers of surrendering to paranoia and of overestimating one's own importance. He could have been one of the rising stars to emerge from the war, not yet forty years old when Lee and Grant met at Appomattox, a major general with demonstrated combat leadership ability and a scar on his cheek to prove his courage. It is not difficult, given both his father's connections and his own cultivated during the war, to imagine Burns embarking on a post-war political career, emulating fellow Ohioans James A. Garfield and Rutherford B. Hayes, who used similar credentials to run for Congress after the war, putting themselves on the road to the White House. Whatever his post-war aspirations, Burns crippled himself with his ill-considered reaction to a crisis that existed only in his own mind. No laurels would be thrown for the general who resigned his commission at the very height of his own nation's struggle to survive. He would be remembered, if at all, as a man who, in Ezra Warner's dismissive words, "evidently preferred administration to field command," a charitable way of saying he could not handle the rigors of combat.¹

At the same time, Burns' paranoia can be blamed upon the treacherous political environment that existed in the Army of the Potomac for the duration of the war. Radical Republicans, epitomized by Stanton and the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, turned a war to preserve the Union into a crusade against Southern slaveholding aristocracy and were openly hostile to any officer who did not offer at least silent approval of their goals and methods. While he does not appear to have been

specifically targeted by the Radicals, Burns knew his status as a conservative Democrat and a loyal supporter of George McClellan placed him in direct opposition to the crusaders and left him sensitive to any potential attacks from that direction. The persecution of and accusations of treason against fellow Democrats in the Army of the Potomac cultivated such a sense of paranoia in Burns that he overreacted to the first perceived slight against him. As Benjamin Thomas and Harold Hyman point out, “it never occurred to Edwin Stanton [or, apparently, to Abraham Lincoln] that a Secretary of War owed his officers greater protection from . . . overzealous congressmen than he accorded to [Democrat generals].”² Had Burns enjoyed the confidence of such protection perhaps he would have followed the advice of his friend Isaac Wistar and returned to a division command until his name came up again for promotion instead of allowing the services of a talented combat leader to go to waste.³

Believing his reputation tarnished and his honor at stake, Burns spent the remainder of his life fighting for the promotion he considered unfairly denied. Brevetted back to his previous rank of brigadier general in 1865, he let the matter rest for a few years immediately following the war. In 1874, apparently believing that he could elicit more sympathy from a fellow officer, he approached the Grant administration about revisiting his failed appointment to major general. Orville E. Babcock, Grant’s personal secretary, took the matter to Secretary of War William Belknap, who investigated and reported finding “no record whatever, that I can discern in the War Department, relative to the appointment of General Burns as Major General.”⁴ Belknap concluded, “I hold in my hand all the papers that can be found on file in the War Department concerning the

case: and am satisfied that [the War Department has made] a full statement of the whole matter.”⁵

Dismayed but not dissuaded, Burns saw new hope in the election to the presidency of his friend Garfield in 1880. Unfortunately, Garfield was assassinated only a few months after his inauguration and Burns was reduced to invoking the deceased President’s name in an appeal to his successor, Chester A. Arthur. “It is my hope,” Burns pleaded, “to remove the stain upon my record of having seemed to voluntarily leave the field, after having laid down the pen to take up the sword, in time of war, for which I was educated, when in fact I was forced out of the field.”⁶ What was worse, “my misfortune followed me into my department when a junior was placed over me. I have no future unless the President place me, when a vacancy occurs, in the rank from which I was debarred.”⁷ If Arthur, who doubtless had other things on his mind in late 1881, made any reply, Burns did not mention it.

Burns remained in the Commissary Department for the rest of his career, serving as chief commissary for various departments in the former Confederate states from 1865 to 1868, filling in as the military mayor of Charleston, South Carolina, for a two week period in the spring of 1868, then transferring to a post as Purchasing Commissary of Subsistence in New York City until 1873. Promoted to colonel in 1884 after spending time as chief commissary in the Department of the Pacific and purchasing commissary in Baltimore, Burns’ peacetime career reached its pinnacle with his assignment as chief commissary of the Division of the Atlantic and the Department of the East from 1884 to

1889. On September, 3 1889, the sixty-four year old officer retired to private life; his quest to become major general would remain unfulfilled.⁸

Burns pursued other interests both before and after his retirement, publishing articles on political, military, religious, and agricultural subjects. He even dabbled in poetry with a piece titled “La Fille du Regiment.” He tried his hand at public speaking, delivering an address before the Nation Agricultural Convention in Chicago in 1882 and another at a reunion of West Point graduates in 1888. However, Burns’ health began to fade, he suffered from severe rheumatism that first struck in 1869 and plagued him for the rest of his life. He apparently grew fond of South Carolina during his time there, moving there after his retirement. He perhaps preferred the warm climate given the painful chills he complained of in his final decade. Just before midnight, April 18, 1892, Burns’ daughter found him lying on his bedroom floor, a doctor was summoned, but the general was dead by the time he arrived.⁹

Endnotes

¹ Warner, *Generals in Blue*, 56.

² Thomas and Hyman, *Stanton*, 261.

³ Wistar to Burns, March 21, 1863, Burns Papers, TAMU.

⁴ William Belknap to O. E. Babcock, October 3, 1874, Burns Papers, TAMU.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Burns to Mr. President, 1881, Burns Papers, TAMU.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Burns, "Military Biography of W. W. Burns," Burns Papers, TAMU.

⁹ Ibid. Welsh, *Medical Histories of Union Generals*, 46.

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