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Article Summary: The battle at Fort Donelson was a victory of strategic importance for a winning combination of land and naval power working together, forged on the Twin Rivers in early 1862. The men of the First Nebraska could claim their share of the credit for success, with their stubborn defense astride the Wynn's Ferry Road.

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Photographs / Images: First Nebraska at Fort Donelson, February 14-15, 1862, map; General John M Thayer during the Civil War

THE FIRST NEBRASKA INFANTRY REGIMENT AND THE BATTLE OF FORT DONELSON

BY BENJAMIN FRANKLIN COOLING

DURING the dark hours of early morning, February 14, 1862, young soldiers of the First Nebraska infantry disembarked from transports at a landing site three miles below Fort Donelson in Middle Tennessee. These toughened representatives of an American frontier territory were marching toward a rendezvous with their first major battle in the Civil War. A savage north wind and blizzard, sweeping over the valley of the Cumberland River, added to their discomfort. The men could not suppress shivers as they drew forty rounds of ammunition prior to joining the Federal force surrounding Fort Donelson. Overnight young Nebraskans were learning that war was no picnic, but rather a freezing hell on earth!

Fort Donelson was not the first assignment for the First Nebraska yet the unit could not style itself as real veterans. Ten companies from throughout the Territory had been organized at Omaha in the early summer of

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1861.¹ Even a company of Iowa Hawkeyes, spoiling for a fight, joined this new unit which became officially the First Nebraska Infantry Regiment. John M. Thayer, formerly a native of Massachusetts, and more recently known to Nebraskans through his service in the territorial legislature, was selected by Governor Alvin Saunders to lead the regiment. On July 30, 1861, five companies departed from Omaha for St. Joseph, Missouri to the cheers of a gathering of local citizenry.²

The regiment spent the autumn of 1861 with Maj. Gen. John C. Fremont's army in Missouri. It was during this period that early favorable impressions were made by the First Nebraska.

As the regiment marched through St. Louis on the 24th of October, the St. Louis *Democrat* reported:

In the afternoon Colonel Thayer's Nebraska First (as splendid a set of men, and as well equipped, full one thousand strong, as ever defended a righteous cause) came from Ironton and passed directly through the city, on their way to the seat of war. The Iron Mountain cars, which received them in the morning at Ironton landed them at night in Jefferson City or farther on. In view of the fact that this was the first regiment that has thus passed the city, General Fremont and Aide were out to receive them, and Musical Director Waldauer, of the staff, with the magnificent band under his supervision, most eloquently performed the honors of the occasion. It was, taken in all, one of the finest sights ever witnessed in this city, thousands of citizens thronged the sidewalks and housetops to witness the lengthened train of 39 cars and 4 locomotives as they passed along. Ladies by hundreds waved their handkerchiefs for joy, while men had no fears in giving lusty cheers for the Union.³

It seems that at this point the rigors of war had not been impressed upon the minds of young boys from Nebraska farmsteads.

As autumn gave way to winter, 1861-1862, the First Nebraska settled into winter quarters at Georgetown, Mis-

¹ Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, (New York: 1959 reprint, 3 volumes), Vol. 2, p. 1345.

² Alfred T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, (Chicago, 1882), p. 232.

³ *Ibid.*

souri. It was not the regiment's good fortune to enjoy these quarters long, for in December the unit was ordered out on constabulary duty. Federal defeats at Wilson Creek and Lexington in August and September had opened much of the state to guerilla fighting and bushwacking.⁴ By early November Union forces had yielded virtually all of southwestern Missouri to Confederate forces under Maj. Gen. Sterling Price.⁵ Marching and countermarching occupied Thayer's regiment as it accompanied a Union force under Brig. Gen. John Pope, determined to restore order and Federal control to northern and central portions of the state.

On December 18, 1861 the First Nebraska participated in a minor skirmish at Shawnee Mound near Milford, on the Blackwater River. The result was Union victory and the capture of some thirteen hundred Confederates.⁶ Both officers and men in the ranks of the First Nebraska were cheered by the experience but they could hardly think of themselves as true combat veterans.

The regiment returned to Georgetown, battled through an epidemic of typhoid fever and prepared itself for the hard campaigning which was predicted for the new year of 1862.

The Nebraska troops did not have long to wait for action of major importance. Late in January 1862, a relative unknown, Brig. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, then commanding a garrison at Paducah Kentucky, convinced Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck, commander of the Department of Missouri, that the great western defense line of the Confederacy could and should be broken. Forts Henry and Donelson located just into Tennessee were attractive weak links in

⁴ J. G. Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, (Boston, 1939), p. 328.

⁵ Franz Sigel, "The Pea Ridge Campaign," in Robert Underwood Johnson, and Clarence Buel, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, (New York, 1887), Vol. 1, p. 314-315.

⁶ *War of the Rebellion, A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128, (Washington, 1880-1901), Series I, Vol. 8, p. 36-38. Hereafter cited as *Official Records*.

the chain of defense which ran roughly along Kentucky's east-west axis from Columbus on the Mississippi to Cumberland Gap in the Alleghany Mountains. Grant was supported by an enthusiastic naval officer, Flag Officer Andrew Foote, and the two together proposed to take a joint army-navy expedition up the twin rivers and overwhelm the Confederate garrisons. Halleck, sensing pressure for action from the administration in Washington, gave reluctant consent to the scheme. Then, fearing Grant's fifteen thousand men might be insufficient for the task, he searched desperately for ways to reinforce the expedition. Stripping his department of any available regiments, Halleck ordered forward the zealous but relatively untested First Nebraska.⁷

The route of march took the regiment from Georgetown to Jefferson City which it reached on February 7. News of the fall of Fort Henry, the previous day, greeted the Nebraskans as they boarded a train for St. Louis. On February 9, 1862, the regiment embarked on the steamer *White Cloud* and was sent to join Grant's army regrouping at Fort Henry before moving overland to besiege Fort Donelson.⁸

At 4:30 p.m. on February 11, shortly before Grant himself left to join his troops marching over soggy roads toward the Cumberland, five gunboats and twelve transports, with eight fresh regiments aboard, among them the First Nebraska, arrived at Fort Henry. Grant immediately ordered these boats to transfer their operations to the Cumberland.⁹ They were directed to land below Fort Donelson in order to reinforce the two divisions Grant was taking overland.

The transports with the gunboat *Carondelet* in escort, returned down the Tennessee River, thence up the Ohio River to Smithland, Kentucky. Entering the Cumberland

⁷ Special Orders 18, January 22, 1862, *Official Records*, I, 8, 535.

⁸ Letter, Henry Halleck to G. W. Cullum, St. Louis, February 9, 1862, *Official Records*, I, 7, p. 597-598.

⁹ *Official Records*, I, 7, p. 159, p. 162.

at this point, the convoy encountered flood waters and numerous floating snags. Heavy February rains had sent the river boiling over its banks and trees and debris clogged the channel. The transports were jammed with troops and equipment and little headway could be made against the rushing current. Meanwhile Grant's field army was having its own share of troubles with Fort Donelson and its stubborn defenders.

Federal forces found that the easy conquest of Fort Henry would not be repeated at Fort Donelson. The fort and nearby town of Dover were located on the south bank at a curve made by the river, seventy-five miles downriver from Nashville. The surrounding country was punctuated by creeks, ravines, and heavy woods. Due to flood conditions, much of the land lay under water, hardly ideal conditions for land movement of military forces. Confederate works in the area consisted of a long line of rifle pits, protected by abatis, extending in a huge semi-circle with northern and southern flanks anchored on the river.¹⁰ Enclosed within these outer defenses were the town of Dover, the fort, and its water batteries. These batteries themselves, were situated one hundred feet above water level in order to prevent gunboats from passing upstream to Nashville. Inside sandbagged embrasures were twelve heavy guns mounted on seacoast carriages.¹¹

In addition some fifteen to twenty thousand battle hungry Confederates manned the overall defense system.¹² A majority of these men were Tennesseans, eager to defend their home state. The greyclad defenders were hampered,

¹⁰ Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, (New York, 1885-1886, 2 vols.) p. 275-296.

John Fiske, *The Mississippi Valley in the Civil War*, (Boston, 1900), p. 57.

¹¹ Armament in the Upper Water Battery consisted of a 6.5 in. rifled cannon and two 32 pounder carronades. The Lower Water Battery mounted eight 32 pounders and a 10 in. Columbiad. Report of Lt. Col. Milton Hayners, March 24, 1862, *Official Records*, I, 7, p. 388.

¹² Strength and casualty figures at Fort Donelson remain inconsistent. Numbers cited in this article are based on Thomas Livermore, *Numbers and Losses in the Civil War*, (Bloomington, 1957 reprint), p. 78.

however, by a weak command system, divided between Brigadier Generals John B. Floyd, Gideon Pillow, and Simon Bolivar Buckner, with Floyd in nominal charge.

Grant invested Fort Donelson on February 12-13, 1862 with his force of fifteen thousand men. Strangely, the Confederates offered little opposition as Union division commanders John B. McClernand and Charles F. Smith moved into position. Local probing assaults by Federal infantry and artillery on the 13th did provide Grant with ample evidence that the defenses were strong. Nevertheless the numerically superior defenders made no effort to escape the evertightening trap.¹³ Meanwhile Grant anxiously awaited arrival of the reinforcements aboard the transports which were slowly steaming up the Cumberland.

As dusk settled over the opposing armies the unseasonably mild weather of early February turned bitterly cold. Fires could not be made by either army and many Federals, having thrown away overcoats and blankets on the march over from Fort Henry, suffered and cursed the freezing weather. That night rain, sleet, and three inches of snow covered the dead, the dying, the cheerless living.¹⁴ It was during such a night that the First Nebraska was initiated to the Fort Donelson scene.

Disembarking in the black darkness of early morning, the reinforcements, among them the Nebraska regiment, were soon trudging along the frozen, rutted road leading to Mrs. Crisp's cabin, Grant's field headquarters. As dawn broke on February 14, 1862, the thermometer stood at ten degrees above zero.

¹³ For a provocative study of Confederate miscalculations and miscues at a command level see: Charles P. Roland, "Albert Sidney Johnston and the Loss of Forts Henry and Donelson," *Journal of Southern History*, XXIII, (1957); also *Official Records*, I, 7, 270-275, 301-336.

¹⁴ *Missouri Democrat* (n.d.) quoted in Frank Moore, (ed.) *The Rebellion Record* (New York, 1862) Vol. 4, p. 179.

Grant organized the eight new regiments into a Third Division, commanded by Brig. Gen. Lew Wallace.¹⁵ The First Brigade, under plucky Col. Charles Cruft, was a reasonably veteran outfit, having served as a unit in Maj. Gen. Don Carlos Buell's Army of the Ohio since December 1861. A second brigade (officially styled the Third Brigade for some unknown reason) was different. Assigned to the leadership of Col. John Thayer of the First Nebraska, the regiments of this brigade (First Nebraska, Fifty-eighth, Sixty-eighth, and Seventy-sixth Ohio) were agonizingly innocent of training and experience. Determination and toughness were present, however, and these in part promised compensation for their military deficiencies. In the absence of Thayer, Lieutenant Colonel William D. McCord commanded the Nebraska troops.

Wallace was unable to assemble his division until 2:30 p.m. He was unaware of the inexperience in his command but wished to move into position, as assigned by Grant, as rapidly as possible. The afternoon wore on as the division moved forward along unfamiliar country lanes, guided solely by Captain John A. Rawlins, Grant's assistant adjutant general. Sounds of naval gunfire in the distance accompanied the column as it pushed on through woods and occasional clearings. The snowfall increased and darkness was closing in as Rawlins at last asked Wallace to halt his men.

Rawlins briefly explained that the Third Division was in the center position with Confederate works, screened by dense woods, less than six hundred yards in front. The division line would be formed along the axis of the Ridge Road as it dipped from high ground into the Indian Creek Valley.¹⁶ The right wing of Smith's division lay one quarter mile to the left through a wall of trees and falling snow.

¹⁵ General Field Officers 14, Copy in Lew Wallace Collection, Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis.

¹⁶ *Official Records*, I, 7, p. 236-237, 252. See also U. S. Military Academy, West Point, Department of Art and Engineering, *West Point Atlas of American Wars* (New York, 1959, 2 vols.), I, Maps 26-28.

McClelland's division was equally distant from Wallace through the dusk and gloom to the right. As Rawlins rode off, Wallace ruefully reflected that his division was not solidly anchored in position but was one of three isolated segments of the army. He was further stung by the reminder that his cavalry—the only possible link with Smith and McClelland—had been left back at Fort Henry.¹⁷

That night brought little joy to the First Nebraska and other commands in the division. The march to the front had left them exhausted, hungry, wet and cold. Fires were once again prohibited and ground covered with snow and water provided little appeal as resting space. Some of the men, too tired to care, forced down raw bacon with hardtack and dropped off to a restless sleep. Officers quietly moved among their men trying to bolster spirits and find out whether their commands could stand a fight if a battle came in the morning.¹⁸

Equally disheartening that night was the news which trickled through the units telling of the disastrous defeat suffered by the Federal gunboats that afternoon. Flag Officer Foote, in attempting to repeat his success at Fort Henry, had maneuvered his gunboats to within four hundred yards of the Confederate water batteries. These batteries so badly mauled the flotilla that it had to retire northward for repairs. By nightfall of February 14, the Confederates were quite undaunted, the Federal naval force could no longer be considered a factor in the battle, and Grant's siege line was dangerously strung out, inviting counterattack.¹⁹

Within Confederate lines, Generals Floyd, Pillow and Buckner had no intention of being starved into surrender. On the morning of February 14 a council of war voted unanimously to attack McClelland's overextended division

¹⁷ Lewis Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography* (New York, 1906, 2 vols.) I, p. 390-392.

¹⁸ Wallace, *Autobiography*, I, 395-396.

¹⁹ Official Records, I, 7, p. 172-174 Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, I, 302-303.

and open the escape route via the Charlotte Road to Nashville. Formation for such an attack stalled into the late afternoon and the Confederate command finally postponed the assault until the following morning.

As the first call of Union bugles sounded on the cold morning air of February 15, blue-clad soldiers were awakened by the crash of gunfire on the extreme right. The Confederate battleline surged forth from jagged ravines and scrubby underbrush, bent low with fallen snow. Seven thousand Confederates, led by Pillow, slashed at McClernand's right flank and, after a fierce two hour fight, began to drive it back towards the Union center. As the situation slowly deteriorated, Wallace and Smith remained unaware of the fighting raging on the far right. Lack of cavalry and the dense forest contributed to the communication breakdown. Finally at 8:00 a.m. Wallace received a request for aid from McClernand. One hour later Buckner threw an additional three thousand men against the First Division and McClernand was in serious trouble.²⁰

Grant's orders forbade Wallace from leaving his position and taking independent action so the division commander simply forwarded McClernand's request on to army headquarters. Unfortunately that morning Grant was absent, visiting the wounded Foote on his gunboat. At 8:30 a.m. a second plea reached Wallace, followed in rapid succession by word from army headquarters that Grant was absent and thus the decision was left entirely up to Wallace. Disregarding Grant's orders, Wallace immediately sent Cruft's brigade to McClernand. By the time Cruft maneuvered into action, between nine and ten o'clock, the First Division line had begun to disintegrate, and the fragments were fleeing along the Wynn's Ferry Road which led toward Fort Henry, twelve miles away.²¹

Meanwhile the First Nebraska and Thayer's brigade remained in position. Shortly before ten o'clock Federal

²⁰ *Official Records*, I, 7, p. 323, p. 337.

²¹ Lew Wallace, "The Battle of Fort Donelson," in *Battles and Leaders*, I, pp. 417-418. *Official Records*, I, 7, pp. 178, 179, 237.

officers of the brigade caught sight of the first tangible evidence of the battle, stragglers and demoralized wrecks of units in McClernand's command. An aide, sent to find the cause, returned to report that the Wynn's Ferry road was jammed with horsemen and wagons, and the whole mass was moving toward the remainder of Wallace's division.

Confusion mounted and discouragement threatened to spread to Wallace's men. Just then several regiments (Twentieth Ohio, Forty-sixth, Fifty-sixth, and Fifty-eighth Illinois) pushed through fugitives who by this time blocked the road leading to Mrs. Crisp's cabin. Wallace directed these units to join Thayer. Wallace then made up his mind to move Thayer's oversized Third Brigade forward to the right in the direction of the Wynn's Ferry Road.²²

The division commander detached the Sixty-eighth Ohio as Thayer's brigade crossed the valley of Indian Creek and ascended the opposite slope. The Buckeyes were ordered to form a roadblock on the Pinery Road which ran through the valley into the Confederate lines. Moving swiftly on to the Wynn's Ferry Road, Thayer's men noticed disorganized elements of McClernand's division everywhere. They stood around in little groups waiting for ammunition and orders to return to the fight.²³ As the hour of crisis arrived Wallace observed that the road dipped slightly, forming a strong defensive position. On either side of Wynn's Ferry Road undergrowth and blackjack thickets channeled any attacking column into the road itself. Hastening back to meet Thayer's oncoming brigade, Wallace shouted; "File the First Nebraska to the right, the next regiments to the left. The two will support the battery between them here. Make a second line of your four regiments and hold it in reserve behind the First Nebraska."²⁴

²² Official Records, I, 7, p. 237, 252.

²³ *Source Books Fort Henry and Fort Donelson Campaigns*, (Fort Leavenworth, 1923), pp. 980, 981.
Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, p. 306-308.

²⁴ Official Records, I, 7, pp. 209-210, 238, 252.
Source Book, p. 982.

Leading the van, the Nebraskans double-timed into position anchoring their left flank on the road. Lt. Col. McCord fused his right flank with the Fifty-eighth Illinois in line to the right. First Lieutenant Peter Wood's section of Battery A, First Illinois Artillery (the Chicago Battery) rolled into position, flipping over a gun in haste. The battery was joined astride the road by guns of Battery B, First Illinois Artillery, Capt. Ezra Taylor in command. A detached contingent of the Thirty-second Illinois took position to the left of the road, the Fifty-eighth Ohio was deployed on the slope of the ridge beyond the Illinois detachment. At that point, tangled underbrush of Bufford Hollow hid the line from Confederate entrenchments several hundred yards away.

Lying on the ground some fifty yards behind the First Nebraska was the Seventy-sixth Ohio. In reserve on the Wynn's Ferry Road to the rear were the Forty-sixth and Fifty-seventh Illinois. These reserves were prepared to respond to any emergency when the fighting developed.²⁵

Wallace and Thayer had hardly formed their troops before the Confederate attack came whirling up the road. When the Federals first sighted the butternuts, they were moving along the road and on either side through the brush. Alignment was rendered impossible and Col. John C. Brown's Tennessee brigade of Buckner's division was forced to bunch up and advance directly forward on the road itself. Their attack was supported by one piece of artillery, served by Graves' Kentucky battery, one hundred yards to the rear.²⁶

Wood's and Taylor's artillerists immediately began to hammer the advancing butternuts with canister and shell. A correspondent for the *Chicago Times* reported; "As the rebels, supposing we were on the retreat, came yelling out of their works into the road, the Chicago boys (Battery A and B) poured a hailstorm of . . . (shell) and canister

²⁵ *Official Records*, I, 7, pp. 209-210, 238, 252.

²⁶ *Official Records*, I, 7, p. 332.

into them slaughtering dozens of them."²⁷ Wallace shouted instructions for Thayer to have his infantry open fire. The brigade commander relayed the word to Lt. Col. McCord of the First Nebraska. Under orders previously given, the left wing of the Nebraska regiment started to blaze away. Seconds later the right side of the regiment commenced to rip the attacking Confederates with musketry.

Wallace "saw the (Nebraskans') muskets rise and fall as if on a parade ground. A volley—and smoke—and after that constant fire at will as fast as skilled men could load."²⁸ The Confederates returned the fire warmly but made little effort to storm portions of Thayer's line other than that held by the First Nebraska and the artillery. Twenty-five years later Wallace, who remembered the ensuing scene vividly, wrote:

The Confederates struggled hard to perfect their deployments. The woods rang with musketry and artillery. The brush on the slope of the hill was mowed away with bullets. A great cloud arose and shut out the woods and the narrow valley below.²⁹

Brown's attack quickly bogged down in the face of the heavy resistance offered by the First Nebraska and the Illinois batteries. The Confederates were also raw troops, and they had been marching and fighting since dawn. Faced with superior numbers and devastating firepower, such crack units as the Third Tennessee infantry were thrown into confusion and fell back several hundred yards.³⁰ The Eighteenth and Thirty-second Tennessee regiments were likewise repulsed by Wallace's roadblock. Impetus of the Confederate breakthrough vanished and confusion among the Confederate generals, at this point, yielded the initiative in the battle. As Brown's brigade regrouped for further assaults on the Federal position,

²⁷ Special Dispatch to the *Chicago Times*, February 16, 1862 quoted in *Source Book*, p. 923.

²⁸ *Source Book*, p. 983.

²⁹ *Battles and Leaders*, I, 421.

³⁰ Major Nathan Chairs, 3d Tennessee, in *Autograph Book of Governor John Brown, Ft. Warren, Boston, 1862*, in Manuscript Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

Official Records, I, 7, 348, 350.

Pillow directed all Confederate forces back to the entrenchments. Buckner violently protested but Floyd upheld Pillow's rash move. Reluctantly the greyclad soldiers withdrew, abandoning the field to the Federals.³¹

Thayer's brigade made no attempt to counterattack the retiring Confederates. Thayer, with a note of discontent, recorded in his official report; "Nothing but the thick underbrush prevented a charge with the bayonet."³² About 3 p.m., Grant arrived on the battlefield and immediately ordered restoration of Union battlelines on the right. At the same time Smith's division was directed to assault Confederate rifle pits in the Eddyville Road sector on the far left. The First Nebraska remained in its defensive position astride the Wynn's Ferry Road during these actions.

At daylight on February 16, Thayer moved his brigade forward along the road and joined the re-fused Federal right wing. Before the Federals could begin any further attacks on the Confederate entrenchments, white flags appeared above the earthworks. Later that morning, Buckner and Grant met to discuss surrender terms at the Dover Tavern. Fourteen thousand Confederates were thus surrendered and transported northward to prison camps.³³ It was the first of three such significant surrenders for Ulysses S. Grant during the war.

The meaning of Fort Donelson can not be measured by heavy casualty figures. Of the twenty-seven thousand Federals finally brought together before the fort, two thousand-six hundred were killed or wounded as opposed to an estimated two thousand of the twenty-one thousand Confederates in the battle.³⁴ Losses sustained by the First Nebraska amounted to only ten men.³⁵

³¹ *Official Records*, I, 7, 169, 245, 332, 348-350.

Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, I, 306-307.

³² *Official Records*, I, 7, p. 253.

³³ Livermore, *Numbers and Losses*, 78.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Thayer listed three killed and seven wounded (*Official Records*, I, 7, 253), while an "official" compilation noted two killed, six wounded, and one missing (*Official Records*, I, 7, 169).

Fort Donelson was, instead, a victory of strategic importance for a winning combination of land and naval power working in unison, was forged on the Twin Rivers in early 1862. The first decisive victory for forces of the Union and elimination of one Confederate army in the field resulted from the battle. Flagging spirits and letdown in the Union war effort at home, after the initial patriotic race to the colors in 1861, evaporated in a new spurt of dedication to preservation of the Union.

The people of the North had a new general to watch and applaud as his star rose on the Union horizon. Ulysses Simpson Grant, whose sobriquet, "Unconditional Surrender," seemed to fit so well the modest, retiring, yet resolute man, who had seized the initiative. Despite temporary setbacks, he was never to lose it.³⁶

Grant's victory was due, in part, to the dogged persistence of the man in the ranks. Men of the First Nebraska could claim their share of the credit for success. Their stubborn defense astride the Wynn's Ferry Road had stemmed the tide of retreat and saved Grant's army from catastrophe. Crushing volleys from muskets of the regiment and the artillery fire of the Illinois batteries had blunted the spearhead of a desperate Confederate assault. Arriving back on the field at a fortuitous moment Grant was able to seize the initiative from a dazed Confederate command and sweep to victory.

It was with pardonable understatement that Col. John Thayer recorded in his report:

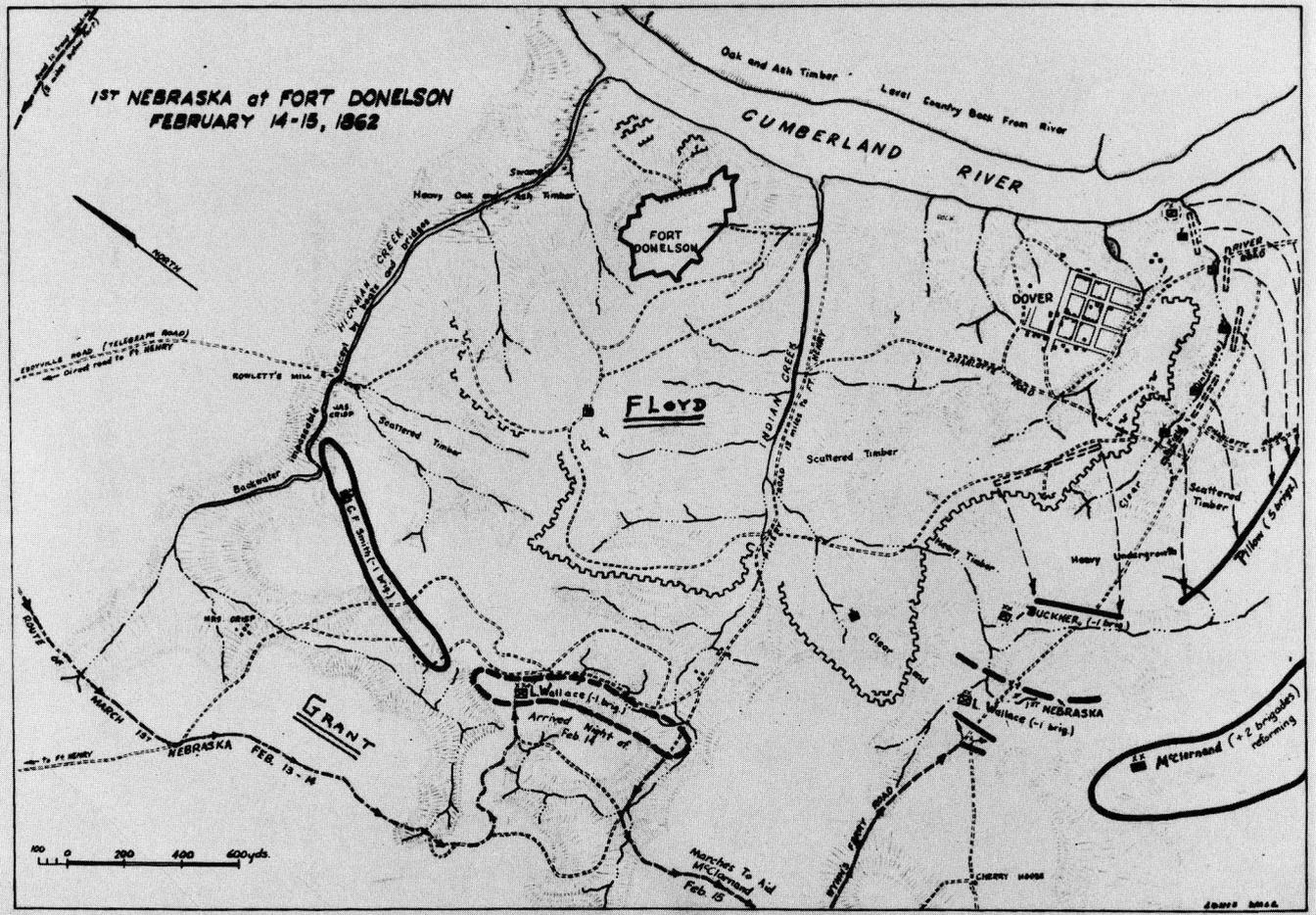
The Nebraska regiment being the only one engaged at this time, I was with it during the action, and am pleased to be able to say that every officer and soldier behaved very gallantly throughout. I cannot omit to speak in high terms of the soldierly bearing and efficient conduct of Lieutenant McCord and Major Livingston during the engagement.³⁷

³⁶ *Missouri Democrat*, February 17, 1862 in *Source Book*, p. 772.

Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 306-307.

³⁷ *Official Records*, I, 7, p. 253.

**1ST NEBRASKA at FORT DONELSON
FEBRUARY 14-15, 1862**





General John M. Thayer during Civil War

Lew Wallace was perhaps more pleased with the regiment's success. He reported:

They (First Nebraska) met the storm, no man flinching, and their fire was terrible. To say they did well is not enough. Their conduct was splendid. They alone repelled the charge.³⁸

Coming from superior officers who witnessed their conduct, these words were dramatic proof that the Nebraskans had met their test of major battle. They had proven themselves worthy of being called "veterans."

Tranquility now reigns along the Cumberland. The men in blue and gray are ghosts to us now. Fort Donelson remains, preserved since 1928 as a National Military Park. For years, however, the park has languished behind more popular battlefield parks, especially those in the East. No monuments have been raised to the Union soldiers who fought there. Even today the circuit of Federal battlelines, and the scene of the Nebraskans decisive stand, lie undeveloped, inviting commercial exploitation beyond the scope of park boundaries. A tribute more fitting would seem to be in order for men of the First Nebraska and other regiments who gave to the Union the key to the Western gateway, Fort Donelson.

³⁸ *Official Records*, I, 7, p. 237.