

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and
Chapters

University of Nebraska Press

2016

Wolford's Cavalry

Dan Lee

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples>

Lee, Dan, "Wolford's Cavalry" (2016). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters*. 325.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/325>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Nebraska Press at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

WOLFORD'S CAVALRY

[Buy the Book](#)

Wolford's Cavalry

*The Colonel, the War in the West,
and the Emancipation Question
in Kentucky*

DAN LEE

POTOMAC BOOKS

An imprint of the University of Nebraska Press

[Buy the Book](#)

© 2016 by the Board of Regents of the University
of Nebraska

All rights reserved. Potomac Books is an imprint
of the University of Nebraska Press.
Manufactured in the United States of America.



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Lee, Dan, 1954– author.

Title: Wolford's Cavalry: the colonel, the war in the
west, and the emancipation question in
Kentucky / Dan Lee.

Description: Lincoln: Potomac Books, an imprint
of the University of Nebraska Press, 2016. |

Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Description based on print version record and CIP
data provided by publisher; resource not viewed.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016020937 (print) |

LCCN 2016020380 (ebook) | ISBN 9781612348605

(epub) | ISBN 9781612348612 (mobi) |

ISBN 9781612348629 (pdf) | ISBN 9781612348513

(cloth: alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Wolford, Frank L. (Frank Lane),

1817–1895. | United States. Army. Kentucky

Cavalry Regiment, 1st (1861–1864) | United States—

History—Civil War, 1861–1865—Biography. |

United States—History—Civil War, 1861–1865—

Campaigns. | United States—History—Civil War,

1861–1865—African Americans. | Lincoln, Abra-

ham, 1809–1865—Adversaries. | Columbia (Ky.)—

Biography.

Classification: LCC E509.6 1st (print) | LCC E509.6

1st .L44 2016 (ebook) | DDC 973.7/449092 [B]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016020937>

Set in Minion Pro by Westchester Publishing Services.

CONTENTS

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xiii

1. Born to Be a Soldier 1
2. A Peaceful Interlude 12
3. Camp Dick Robinson and Wildcat Mountain 21
4. Detachments 37
5. Mill Springs 48
6. Soldiering in Tennessee 66
7. The Perryville Campaign 87
8. Clouds of Blue and Gray 100
9. Crossed Sabers 116
10. Return to Tennessee 132
11. Fighting Longstreet 149
12. What No Man Could Predict 163
13. Wolford and Lincoln 179
14. The Atlanta Campaign 189
15. Stoneman's Macon Raid 201

16. Home	217
17. A Soldier Goes to His Reward	235
Notes	249
Bibliography	267
Index	277

ILLUSTRATIONS

Maps

1. Kentucky and Tennessee, 1861–1862 72
2. The Great Raid, 1863 124
3. The Atlanta Campaign, 1864 193

Figures

Following page 148

1. Colonel Frank Wolford
2. General William “Bull” Nelson
3. General George H. Thomas
4. General Felix K. Zollicoffer
5. General Joseph Wheeler
6. General John Hunt Morgan
7. General Ambrose E. Burnside
8. General George Stoneman

PREFACE

On a certain night in October 2014, I was at stately old Cherry Hall on the campus of Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green to speak about the L&N Railroad during the Civil War. Chatting afterward with some of the audience, I was asked about my next writing project. When I answered, “Colonel Frank Wolford,” a lady said, “He was kind of bad, wasn’t he?”

That is what is remembered of Colonel Wolford, a veteran of the Mexican-American War, a celebrated attorney, a multiterm member of the Kentucky House of Representatives, and a gallant cavalry leader from 1861 to early 1864. During the war, his name appeared in newspapers from every corner of America. He was familiar to readers of the German-language newspaper in Allentown, Pennsylvania, *Der Lecha Patriot*, and the Spanish-language Santa Fe *Gazette*. After the war, Wolford was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives and, for a time, the adjutant general of Kentucky. Despite all of his service, and his widespread nineteenth-century fame, what is remembered about him today is that he was kind of bad.

Wolford’s unenviable reputation springs from an offense that he committed while he was still the nationally acclaimed colonel of the 1st Kentucky Volunteer Cavalry. In early 1864, after months of personal brooding and building resentment, Frank Wolford ruined both his reputation and his career over the question of emancipation and its corollary, the enlistment of African Americans in the Federal army. He made a series of speeches that were so disloyal, even treasonous, that he was dishonorably discharged from the service. Few men’s fall was so steep

or so deep. And still he talked. At the time of his second arrest, Wolford was taken in irons to Washington, where he met with President Lincoln. The meeting was affable, for the most part, but it did not change Wolford's views. Lincoln asked Senator Garrett Davis, "How many men like Wolford have you in Kentucky?" Davis answered, "He is the only one, Mr. President; you can shoot him every morning for his convictions, but he will never surrender one."¹

Davis had accurately plumbed the depths of Wolford's stubbornness, a fact soon proven by the disgraced colonel himself. Though President Lincoln gave him the opportunity to save himself further trouble merely by restraining his urge to speak, Wolford talked on. Finally, under arrest for the third time, he was scheduled to be exiled beyond Federal lines into the Confederacy, not to return until the conclusion of the war. It was a punishment usually reserved for the worst offenders. In the end, Wolford was spared by President Lincoln—the very man he had slandered as a traitor to the Constitution, a usurper, and a fool—and was allowed to remain in Kentucky.

It has been frequently said that Kentucky was the only state that joined the Confederacy after the war ended. In the strong tide of Bluegrass State conservatism that followed the war, Wolford was celebrated as a patriot and rewarded for his racially rooted rebellion against Lincoln, but the esteem once felt for him did not endure. His intransigent racism and his insurgency against the martyred Lincoln darkened his reputation, and he faded into history. In one sense, that is regrettable. His military record established him as one of the most vigorous, courageous, and original commanders in the most flamboyant branch of the service. Men of both sides wrote of him. An old Rebel, writing in the Memphis *Public Ledger* in 1893, remembered:

He had a regiment of mountaineers like himself—one of the best bodies of men in the service. I was in the Confederate army, and our command never began a march that we were not confronted by old Wolford. We had to lick him regularly every morning all one summer. His riders would make a stand and fight like the devil, and then when they found themselves outnumbered they would scatter and

come together that night to resume the fun the next day. I never saw such a command in my life.²

And a Union veteran from Michigan, writing in 1890, had this to say:

Although a typical Kentucky mountaineer, Frank Wolford always impressed me as a fine type of the Puritan horseman—a rough rider of Cromwell’s era, living two centuries after his time. In the prime of life, of medium height, strong as a bull, tireless as the wind, stubborn and set in all his opinions, with the eye of a hawk and the fearlessness of a tiger, he was just the man to lead that wonderful band of horsemen.³

There is no denying that Wolford was a brave leader, and it is that aspect of his life that is put forward by a heroic bas-relief sculpture in Columbia, the southern Kentucky town where he lived his final years. However, a fine piece of public art and local pride notwithstanding, his courage is not what is widely remembered about Wolford. Today, even the most knowledgeable students of the war have but one overriding impression of Wolford: he was kind of bad.

This book is not in any way an attempt to explain or excuse the unpalatable views and ugly behavior of Frank Wolford. Rather, it is an attempt to restore some balance to the story of a crude and complicated but talented man and the unconventional regiment he led in the fight to save the Union. The 1st Kentucky Cavalry, “Wolford’s Cavalry,” continued to serve with tireless gallantry after Wolford was stripped of his rank and removed from the service—and it is worth noting that when voting in the presidential election of 1864, the regiment gave Lincoln a thirty-vote majority over his opponent, George B. McClellan.

Moreover, this book is an effort to place Wolford’s story in the context of the political and cultural crosscurrents that tore at Kentucky during the war. Caught up in the tensions of the time, Wolford was ruined militarily, rewarded politically, and then ruined again when passions cooled and historical memory came into play. That he is remembered today in such a negative light would be a great surprise to Wolford, a man who spent much of his life successfully courting the favor of jurors and voters.

If many of his political notions have become unacceptable in what we hope and believe is a more enlightened time, his record as a fighting Union man remains as one to be honored. That is the way it is with Wofford. Every statement of fact about this exasperating Kentuckian can be countered with, “Yes, but. . . .” Therein lies the interest and the aggravation.

What follows is the story of Colonel Frank Wofford and the 1st Kentucky Cavalry.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The misunderstood phrase “You didn’t build that” has become for some a charged political statement, and yet the truth of it when referring to the physical or intellectual product of an individual’s applied creativity is undeniable and should be self-evident. It applies equally to manufacturing plants, to medical practices, and to the book you now hold. No one who produces a book of history has built it alone. Of the many, present and past, who contributed in some way to this book, the author would like to mention four, specifically.

The first is the late Dr. James W. Hammack of the History Department of Murray State University, Murray, Kentucky.

The second is the late Dr. Lowell H. Harrison of the History Department of Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky.

The third is Brandon Slone, archivist, Military Records and Research Branch, Kentucky Military History Museum, Frankfort, Kentucky.

The fourth, but by no means the last, is the author’s wife, Linda Akins Lee, whose advice, counsel, and companionship have ever been and remain of inestimable value. This book is dedicated to her.

WOLFORD'S CAVALRY

[Buy the Book](#)

1 Born to Be a Soldier

Franklin Lane Wolford was born on September 2, 1817, in Adair County, Kentucky. His father, John Wolford, was a surveyor and a schoolteacher who had immigrated to Kentucky from Jefferson County, Virginia, in the lower Shenandoah Valley. Frank Wolford's mother was Mahala Lane, and she was the second wife of John Wolford. The first wife, Jenny Lapsley, had borne John eight children before she died; Mahala gave him seven more. Of this second brood, Frank was the oldest.

John Wolford is sometimes described as a poor man, and probably he was cash poor, for there was a depression after the War of 1812 that crippled Kentucky's economy. Out of the wreckage of the Panic of 1819, only two of Kentucky's fifty-nine banks remained, the Bank of Kentucky and the National Bank. They and their branches clamped down on debtors, and Kentuckians howled for relief.

John Wolford may have been among those who were stranded after the flood of worthless paper money subsided in 1819. However, it would have been unusual for any surveyor to be really destitute. He owned several tracts of rolling southern Kentucky land totaling 1,660 acres. Seven slaves worked the land, so it was made to produce, and what the Wolford family did not consume, they could always barter.

John Wolford taught his son Frank at home. The younger Wolford himself taught school for a time, but he was no scholar, and neither teaching nor the solitary profession of surveying interested him. His interests and ambitions pulled him in another direction. After a while he began to read law under Hiram Thomas of Pennsylvania. This work, combining the pursuit of justice and performance art, appealed strongly

to him. He devoted himself to his studies and soon earned his license to practice. Judge Rollen Hunt remarked that Wolford “was fairly well grounded in the principles of the common law, especially as it applied to land titles, contracts and criminal law procedure, though so far as was known to the public, and to the members of the legal profession, he was possessed of but few books, and but few persons ever caught him in the act of perusing them.”¹

Judge Hunt added that Wolford “was never known to indulge in any of the trickery which certain persons though sometimes from misinformation so generally attribute to the practitioners of the criminal law.” Perhaps it depends on how one defines trickery, but Wolford certainly appears not to have been above a bit of chicanery if it might lead to acquittal for his client. Once, while defending a woman who was accused of murdering her husband by arsenic poisoning, Wolford was able to persuade the jury that the man had accidentally poisoned himself by swallowing a fly. The Bluegrass Lucrezia Borgia went free. At other times, Wolford simply wore his listeners down; it was said jokingly that he would not quit talking until it thundered. He was known to speak for three or four hours at a stretch.²

Reviewing Wolford’s legal talents, Judge Hunt allowed that “there were few men who were more effective as advocates.”³

In 1846, Wolford was practicing law in Liberty, Casey County, Kentucky. Excitement was in the air. Trouble was brewing with Mexico over the question of where, exactly, the southern boundary of Texas should be, and it appeared that it would only be a matter of time until the nation was at war. Kentucky was preparing. In September 1845, Kentucky Governor William Owsley had been notified by the secretary of war that General Zachary Taylor, who was already with his troops on the edge of the disputed territory, had the authority to call upon Kentucky for volunteers when they were needed.

In April 1846, one of Taylor’s cavalry patrols had a violent clash with some Mexicans, and American lives were lost. President Polk announced that a state of war existed. Congress quickly made a formal declaration, appropriated \$10,000,000 for expenses, and authorized Polk to raise an army of twelve-month volunteers. On May 22, Governor Owsley called

for two regiments of infantry and one of cavalry, which would satisfy the commonwealth's quota. Less than a week later, on May 26, the governor announced that the quota was filled.

Frank Wolford had been raising an infantry company in Casey County when the governor's announcement came that no new companies were needed. He gave up his recruiting and joined Captain William B. Daugherty's Lincoln County company as a private. Companies from all over the state were moving toward Louisville, where they would be mustered into service. Captain Daugherty's company arrived in the city at the Falls of the Ohio on June 8, was mustered in the next day, and was assigned to the 2nd Kentucky Infantry under Colonel William R. McKee. McKee was an 1829 graduate of West Point, but since his resignation from the army in 1836, he had served as a municipal engineer in Charleston, South Carolina, in Louisville, and in Cincinnati. In the two years preceding the outbreak of war, McKee had been the construction engineer for the Frankfort & Lexington Railroad. McKee's second-in-command was Lieutenant Colonel Henry Clay Jr., son of the Great Compromiser. Private Frank Wolford, a Whig, would have been proud to serve in the same regiment as young Clay. The lieutenant colonel was another graduate of the military academy, class of 1831. He had finished second in his class, but, like McKee, he did not make the army his career. He had resigned from the service to pursue a career in law and politics. Clay was a Lexington lawyer and a former one-term member of the Kentucky House of Representatives. Though both officers were accomplished and would prove themselves to be brave, it was Lieutenant Colonel Clay who had more of the military temperament. He did not observe McKee for many months before he wrote in a letter to his father, "A regt. may be likened to a limited monarchy. Everything depends upon the head. The commander of this one is a good fellow, but slow in his conclusions with no capacity for organization." He called McKee's excessive use of alcohol a "dangerous fault."⁴

The volunteers bivouacked at Oakland Racetrack, a short distance south of downtown Louisville. They called the encampment "Camp Ow-sley," and there the game of soldiering quickly lost much of its glamour. They had no weapons, but that would soon be remedied. More serious

was the lack of shelter tents and regular rations. The raw volunteers were uncomfortable, restless, and bored with the endless but necessary drill that would turn them into disciplined fighting men.

Louisville was undoubtedly the largest city that most of them had ever seen. They were young and full of sap and away from home for the first time, and the allure of the city was too great to resist. It was natural that they would misbehave. The 2nd Kentucky soon earned a reputation for its rowdiness and drunkenness. It was said that “every visit of the volunteers to Louisville meant a conflict with the peace officers and a trail of outraged citizens.” It did not help matters that Colonel McKee was a hard drinker himself.⁵

Louisville must have been as pleased as the boys themselves were in late June when the 2nd Kentucky clambered aboard the riverboats *Louisville* and *Sultana* and steamed away down the Ohio River. They churned past Cairo into the Mississippi, past Memphis and Helena and Natchez, and stopped at Baton Rouge, where they received their muskets. On board again, they proceeded to New Orleans. From there, in the second week in July, they crossed the Gulf of Mexico to Brazos Santiago and from there proceeded to the mainland to begin the long march into Mexico. They spent the next five months on garrison duty in a succession of Mexican cities that had already been conquered by General Taylor, including Monterrey. Monterrey was a beautiful city of fifteen thousand, situated in a pleasing mixed landscape of steep hills and fields of corn and sugarcane. Groves of pecan and oak trees were reminiscent of home. The city’s streets were straight and lined by white, flat-topped houses, and near the center of town, in the Grand Plaza, was the domed cathedral. The citizens were not overly friendly, having recently seen the fighting in their very streets end in an American victory. The occupation that followed was tense, and the raucous behavior of these newest arrivals, the Kentucky boys, did not improve relations. Private Frank Wolford is said to have stood apart from his comrades, as far as his behavior was concerned. A Baptist, Wolford did not curse or indulge in addictive habits, and since the regiment had no chaplain, he was usually called upon to perform the burial rites when an unlucky boy died of one of the multitude of diseases that plagued Mexico.

Luckily, the occupation of Monterrey did not last long. In January 1847, the regiment was summoned to join the main army at Agua Nueva, a few miles south of Saltillo. It looked as if the boys were going to see some real action at last. They did not know that in joining Taylor they were complicit in an act of insubordination. After the victory at Monterrey, President Polk, a Democrat, saw Zachary Taylor, a Whig, as a rising political opponent. Polk tried and failed to find an acceptable Democrat to counter Taylor's popularity, so the president elevated another Whig to command. Winfield Scott was authorized to lead a waterborne expedition against Veracruz and open a second front against Santa Anna. From the coast, Scott would drive against Mexico City. His fame would equal Taylor's. Two Whig heroes would divide the party and open a path toward Democratic victory in the presidential election of 1848.

To pursue his campaign, Scott was authorized to take the bulk of General Taylor's army, including all of his infantry regulars and most of his battle-tested volunteers. Also, Taylor was ordered to confine his operations to the vicinity of Monterrey.

Taylor was angered at having his army stolen from beneath him and at being restricted in his movements. He knew what was happening. A tricky knave of a president and a grasping, ambitious general were conspiring against him for political gain. They were slowing the progress of the country's most successful general in the midst of a war whose outcome was far from decided. Taylor's honor was outraged and his military sense offended, and he decided on a course of open defiance. Instead of remaining near Monterrey, he advanced to Saltillo and beyond to Agua Nueva with 4,600 men. It was at Agua Nueva that the 2nd Kentucky joined Taylor.

Taylor was not only a newly minted American hero; he was a Whig and a Kentuckian as well. His unorthodox style suited the Bluegrass volunteers exactly. He dressed like a farmer, in a dusty green coat, a checked shirt, and rumpled trousers, a cotton kerchief carelessly tied around his neck. His hats were a daily surprise. Sometimes he wore a broad-brimmed straw hat, at other times a little old cap that was oiled to keep out the weather. He was even seen in a Mexican sombrero on

occasion. Neither was his posture ramrod straight. He walked like a plowman crossing his field, and graceful riders scoffed that he slumped in the saddle “like a toad.” Yet, the man’s natural dignity shined through. He was clear thinking and strong willed. He was imperturbable in all situations but one, when he observed men not doing their duty. Zachary Taylor was a man the volunteers were proud to follow. He would be the model for Frank Wolford’s own career in the next war.⁶

From his camp at Agua Nueva, Taylor dispatched scouting parties to watch the southern approaches. On February 21, they returned to Taylor with the alarming news that the Mexicans were at La Hedionda and La Encarnacion, less than thirty miles away. Santa Anna had quietly moved his army of 15,000 north behind a screen of 2,500 cavalry. Taylor ordered all surplus stores to be burned and fell back to La Angostura, about a mile south of the hacienda Buena Vista.

La Angostura was the most easily defended point on the main road between Agua Nueva and Saltillo, and it was here that Taylor decided to dig in to face an enemy that outnumbered him by a factor of three to one. General John Wool, Taylor’s second-in-command, was ordered to place the troops while Taylor rode on to Saltillo to perfect his defenses there. Rumors abounded that Mexican cavalry was patrolling in that direction, and Taylor was concerned about his base.

At La Angostura, the San Luis Potosí–Saltillo Road ran through a narrow defile. A few artillery pieces could easily hold it. General Wool posted Major John M. Washington’s artillery there, with the 1st Illinois Infantry in support. On the right (west) of the road, as one faced south, the land was broken into a series of sharp, narrow ridges that came together and widened out at the top to form a small table. The terrain was so difficult as to discourage enemy gun crews from dragging their pieces to the top, and they would be observed if they tried. It was the American left flank that was worrisome. In the far distance was a mountain and in the near distance was a series of deep ravines and long ridges extending toward the road. In between was a broad, rolling plateau. Wool was tactician enough to realize that it was here the main attack would come. On the extreme left, near the base of the mountain, the Kentucky and Arkansas cavalries were posted. Slightly in front and to the right of

the horse soldiers were Captain John Paul Jones O'Brien's artillery battery, the 2nd Indiana Infantry, the 3rd Indiana, a company of Texas Rangers, and the 2nd and 1st Illinois Infantry. The defensive line ran from the mountain base northwest, terminating near the road and Washington's artillery. Two squadrons of dragoons, Captain Braxton Bragg's and Captain Thomas W. Sherman's batteries, the Mississippi Rifles, and the 2nd Kentucky Infantry were held in reserve on the big plateau.

Santa Anna's army had been close behind Taylor's. They appeared at La Angostura late on the morning of February 22, but if the Americans expected immediate action, they were disappointed. Nothing happened. Both sides waited. Taylor thought that Santa Anna was waiting for the rear elements of his large army to arrive. By afternoon they had, and now Santa Anna wasted no time in testing each American flank. Enemy movements on the right caused Bragg's battery and the 2nd Kentucky Infantry to be ordered to the top of the small ridge west of the road. At the same time, Santa Anna threw a more serious infantry attack against the left flank. From their new position on the right, the boys of the 2nd Kentucky could look across to the high ground on the left and see the belligerents maneuvering among the chaparral and the Spanish bayonet. The American cavalry was pushed back a bit, but the attack had begun too late on this short winter's day, and darkness soon brought an end to it.

Satisfied that there would be no more trouble until morning, Taylor took the Mississippi Rifles and some dragoons and returned to Saltillo. It would be a disaster for the Americans if the Mexicans seized their base and surrounded them in this barren desert.

While the Americans slept in their fireless camps at La Angostura that night, the Mexicans were busy. A small force ascended the heights on the American right. About dawn, they launched a weak and unsuccessful attack. At eight o'clock, Santa Anna threw a column of infantry straight up the road. It was doomed from the start. From directly in their front, Washington's artillery opened fire, and Bragg began pumping artillery salvos into their flank from his position west of the road. The enemy formation broke apart and the survivors scattered.

Both of these attacks seem to have been intended to divert attention from the Mexicans massing in a ravine just below the edge of the plateau

on the American left. Two Mexican divisions attacked with a fury, concentrating on Captain O'Brien's three-gun battery. The 2nd Indiana and the unengaged companies of the 2nd Illinois added their musket fire to O'Brien's big rounds. The Mexicans responded with a deadly flanking fire from one twenty-four-pounder fieldpiece and two eighteen-pounders. After thirty minutes, or perhaps it was longer (time took on a flexible quality in battle, and later no one seemed to remember exactly how long it was), Colonel W. A. Bowles of the 2nd Indiana had had all he could take; he led his men to the rear. Its flank uncovered, the 2nd Illinois had no choice but to follow. The retreat became a rout and swept up Captain Sherman's artillery battery, as well as the Arkansas and Kentucky dismounted cavalry. As the cavalrymen tried to get to their horses, they were chased down and slaughtered by Mexican lancers. In the midst of his thunderous work, Captain O'Brien had not noticed that he had been deserted by the infantry, and now he suddenly realized that he was fighting without support. He limbered up and pulled two of his guns to safety; the members of the third gun crew were all lying dead, along with their horses.

About this time, two important things occurred: General Taylor arrived on the scene with the Mississippi Rifles, who joined the fight, and Colonel McKee and Captain Bragg appeared on the right flank. A bit earlier, before the situation became critical, the 2nd Kentucky and Bragg's guns had been ordered to move over from their ridge west of the road and prepare to join the fighting on the big plateau. Now Taylor ordered them into action. As McKee's infantrymen moved across the undulating plain, they broke rank to go around clumps of brush and disappeared into a swale. It appeared to Taylor that his fellow Kentuckians were fanning out to hide, and he exploded to Lieutenant Colonel Thomas L. Crittenden of his staff, "By God, Mr. Crittenden, this will not do—this is not the way for Kentuckians to behave themselves, when called upon to make good a battle—it will not answer, sir!"⁷

When the Kentuckians came out of the low spot and surged forward, their lines neatly dressed, Taylor realized he had misjudged them. He shouted in a voice that could be heard over the din, "Hurrah for old Kentucky! That's the way to do it, give them hell, damn them!"⁸

The enemy line was only twenty yards away. The Kentuckians gathered up some of the 1st Illinois and flew into the Mexicans. Supported by fire from Bragg's and Sherman's guns, they shoved the Mexicans back four hundred yards. Among them was Santa Anna, whose horse was shot from beneath him. The Napoleon of the West had to hobble back to safety on foot—a painful thing for a man with a wooden leg.

The Kentuckians had advanced to within range of the Mexican artillery, and they were now ordered back. They returned with battle trophies, two Mexican flags that they had captured in this, their first time under fire. They rested and watched as the Mississippi Rifles, along with some of the 2nd Indiana boys and the 3rd Indiana, contended with the Mexican forces on the left of the new American line. Forming their line into a V across a wide ridge, the Americans were able to anchor both flanks on a ravine. It was an unusual formation and seemed to baffle the Mexicans. They advanced to the opening of the V, and the Americans opened fire. The Mexicans were hurled back. The wounded were set upon by the Mississippians with their big bowie knives. The survivors sought shelter in an arroyo. Cut off and unable to rejoin the main body, they faced almost certain annihilation.

Santa Anna saved them by a trick. About 1:00 P.M., a party of Mexicans was seen approaching. Lieutenant Colonel Clay was about to order his Kentuckians to open fire, when he noticed that they were carrying a white flag. The white-flag couriers were escorted to General Taylor and conveyed to him a question from Santa Anna: What did the American general want? The question, as phrased, made little sense, but Santa Anna apparently meant that he wanted a truce to discuss terms. Taylor decided to send General Wool to parley with Santa Anna and ordered his men to hold fire. He naturally expected the Mexicans to do the same, but, as he reported, "Upon reaching the Mexican lines, General Wool could not cause the enemy to cease their fire, and accordingly returned without having an interview."⁹

Santa Anna had used the lull to extract his soldiers from the ravine where they were trapped and to reform his lines for another attack. Soon, a fresh wave of Mexicans came charging across the plateau. American artillery stopped them and sent them flying back in the direction from

which they had come. Seeing the enemy in retreat, Taylor ordered the 1st and 2nd Illinois and the 2nd Kentucky to charge. A thousand Illinois and Kentucky volunteers leaped up and followed the enemy a half mile. What they did not see was a hidden ravine—much like the one that had fooled Taylor earlier in the day—that sheltered the main body of Mexican reserves and an artillery battery.

At the first fire of the Mexicans' guns, the Americans realized that they were in an impossible position. They retreated to a ravine and plunged in, hoping to follow it down to the Saltillo–San Luis Potosí Road. They had made a fatal mistake. As they scrambled over the rough ground in the bottom of the arroyo, the Mexicans hurried to line the edges above them. The Americans were caught in a terrible crossfire pouring down on them. Unit cohesion was utterly lost. Mexican lancers, expert riders that they were, eased their horses over the rim and down the steep sides into the ravine while others raced around toward the mouth of the ravine. They plugged the escape route. The American situation had become even worse, if that was possible.

The trapped Americans were only saved by the fire of Washington's battery, still on the road, blasting the lancers away from the ravine mouth. They opened the door and then held it open with salvos of grapeshot, which kept the Mexicans back. The men inside the ravine were still taking heavy casualties. Colonel John J. Hardin of the 1st Illinois went down with a mortal wound. Colonel McKee of the 2nd Kentucky was shot through the neck and killed. Lieutenant Colonel Henry Clay Jr. was wounded in the ankle and in the thigh before he fell. A squad of his men turned back to carry him to safety. Frank Wolford was one of them. They had not gone far when a storm of grapeshot knocked them down. Some were killed; Wolford was wounded, and Clay was wounded further but was still conscious. He ordered his men to save themselves and leave him behind. This they did. The Mexican lancers soon swarmed around Clay and stabbed him to death. The survivors debouched from the mouth of the ravine while Washington's cannon held fire, but as soon as they were clear, the guns spoke again and inflicted a terrible carnage on the Mexicans.

Meanwhile, the Mexican right wing continued to attack atop the plateau. It was a very close thing. They killed all of Captain O'Brien's artillery horses, and he was forced to give up his remaining two guns. Bragg and Sherman kept firing, though, ripping wide holes in the enemy's ranks, and the attack faltered and failed. "No farther attempt was made by the enemy to force our position," reported General Taylor, "and the approach of night gave an opportunity to pay proper attention to the wounded, and also to refresh the soldiers, who had been exhausted by incessant watchfulness and combat." The wounded were evacuated to Saltillo after nightfall, and seven fresh companies were brought forward to La Angostura. Santa Anna was expected to renew the attack in the morning. He still held the advantage in numbers.¹⁰

But the generalissimo did not hold the advantage in strength of will. During the night the Mexicans left their camps. The Battle of Buena Vista was over. Santa Anna admitted to 591 killed and 1,048 wounded. Taylor reported that the Americans had lost 267 killed (including twenty-eight officers) and 456 wounded out of the 4,759 engaged. The 2nd Kentucky and the 1st and 2nd Illinois accounted for 45 percent of the fatalities and 33 percent of the wounded.

The 2nd Kentucky Volunteers had fought their one and only battle of the war. Soon they would be headed home to their farms and small businesses. Frank Wolford would be returning to his law practice. They were not the same boys who had left Kentucky, though. They were wiser and sadder. They were men.