

Union Brigadier Generals Edmund Kirk and August Willich hardly suspected the degree of danger they faced at dawn on December 31, 1862, north of the Stones River near the town of Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Two divisions of rebel soldiers under the commands of Major Generals Patrick R. Cleburne and John P. McCown had silently assembled directly

ease, as Kirk's remnants had already scattered them. The Confederates prepared to vanquish the Forty-Ninth Ohio, while Rains and his Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee troops gained the rear. The Eighty-Ninth Illinois vanished, leaving only the Fifteenth Ohio to make a brief, futile stand before they, too, took to their heels and skedaddled.

Disaster unfolded. All sense of organ-

Willich and his comrades were forced to sign a parole of honor, promising not to fight the Confederates until exchanged. Their day of deliverance would be much further in the future than they anticipated.

August Willich was the prize capture by Confederates at the Battle of Stones River. A career officer in the Prussian army, he had joined ill-fated rebellions in Germany in 1848 and 1849 against his

# I THINK, BOYS, I AM DONE FOR!

*Taken captive, a Prussian general in Union blue left a memorable account of his time in Civil War Georgia.*

opposite Kirk and Willich on the extreme right wing of Major General William Starke Rosecrans's 42,000-man Army of the Cumberland, well positioned to strike the flank of the unwary soldiers in blue.

While Union soldiers enjoyed breakfast, the Confederates primed their troops with a few swigs of whisky and awaited orders to attack. At 6:22 a.m. Willich and his commander were consulting at division headquarters, while Lieutenant Colonel Fielder A. Jones of the Thirty-Ninth Indiana Regiment probed the enemy with his skirmish lines. Suddenly, Jones heard shots. Then he saw the enemy coming.<sup>1</sup>

Skirmishers from Edmund Kirk's brigade described the onslaught of tens of thousands of rebels upon their thin lines as resembling a "tornado," with hordes of gray-clad soldiers "yelling and shooting like demons."<sup>2</sup> McCown's front line brigades of Generals James Rains, Matthew D. Ector, and Evander McNair, aligned from south to north, overran the skirmishers and crashed into Kirk's main line in mere minutes, disabling the commander and sweeping his men from the field. As they fled northwest, Kirk's regiments careened directly through Willich's brigade, creating confusion and panic.<sup>3</sup>

In the meantime, Ector's Texans were rolling over the Thirty-Ninth and Thirty-Second Indiana regiments with

organization disintegrated. Union soldiers ran for their lives.<sup>4</sup>

August Willich heard the commotion and leapt onto his horse, desperate to rejoin his command.<sup>5</sup> Amid the smoke and confusion, he galloped directly into McNair's Arkansans, who were mopping up what was left of Kirk's broken brigade. James Stone, a volunteer aide to General McNair, confronted Willich and demanded his surrender, but Willich turned his horse and fled.<sup>6</sup> A cannonball shattered the hind leg of Willich's horse, but the general was uninjured. Stone took Willich's sword and led him away.<sup>7</sup>

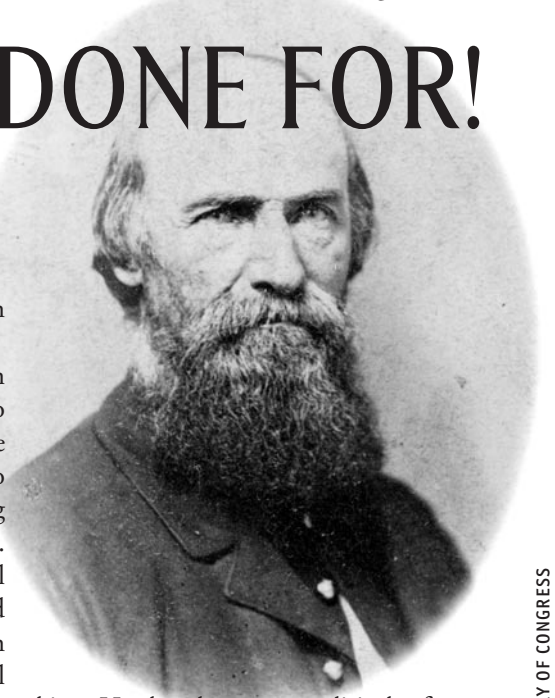
Willich and thousands of captured Union soldiers were rushed to the rear of the Confederate lines. They crossed a railroad bridge and caught a glimpse of Confederate Army of Tennessee commander Braxton Bragg directing his 37,000 troops from the opposite bank. Jubilant guards herded the captives into the walled courthouse yard in Murfreesboro. They told prisoners that they were lucky, since rebels would raise the black flag and kill those captured the following day, when Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was to take effect.<sup>8</sup>

A fellow prisoner observed Willich wringing his hands and moaning, "My poor boys! My poor boys!"<sup>9</sup> Some fifty commissioned officers were moved to upstairs rooms to make room for more Yankee prisoners. His brigade decimated,

king. He then became a political refugee in America.

In the opening year of the American Civil War, Willich rose rapidly in the volunteer Union army, commanding a regiment that defeated a much larger force of Confederates at Rowlett's Station, Kentucky, and killed Colonel Benjamin F. Terry of the famed Texas Rangers. Willich's sparkling performance at Shiloh in April 1862 earned him promotion to the rank of general, commanding what became the First Brigade in the Second Division of the right wing of Rosecrans's army. The Federals were moving forward, intent on driving the rebels out of middle

**ABOVE:** Brevet Major General August Willich (1810-1878). Willich was a first lieutenant of artillery in the Prussian Army before joining republican rebels. He emigrated to America in 1853. Willich helped raise two all-German regiments for the Union and served for the duration of the Civil War.



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Tennessee, so Willich's capture and removal from the field of battle delighted Confederate leaders.

Willich gazed out of Murfreesboro's courthouse window at smoke from the battle two miles to the northwest. His ears told him that the initial rout had turned into a desperate struggle. His eyes convinced him that reports from rebels of Rosecrans in full retreat toward Nashville were false. A deluge of prisoners into the courthouse yard slowed to a mere trickle.

Near nightfall, cannon still thundered. Willich and his famished, exhausted comrades marched to the rail station, loaded into boxcars, and began their journey south. The prisoners demanded rations, which were promised on arrival late in the evening at Tullahoma. When they finally arrived, most received only a single small, hard biscuit. The prisoners received only water until they reached Chattanooga late in the evening of January 1, 1863. They were shuttled to a warehouse on the outskirts of town, then back to the cars for a night ride to Atlanta. By early morning, Willich and his companions reached Atlanta for what most figured would be a short stay. It turned out to be several weeks.

Just days after Willich's arrival in Atlanta, Confederate President Jefferson Davis issued a proclamation declaring that captured Union officers should be considered complicit in fomenting slave rebellion, delivered up to local authorities, and jailed in civil prisons with common criminals. Willich believed this was just slightly better than being handed over to a lynch mob.

When the captives first viewed their place of confinement, a fine three-story brick building at the corner of Whitehall and Alabama streets, it looked clean and spacious. It was close by the railroad car shed, where they could watch troops and supplies being sent to the front. The building had been the local Masonic Hall until 1860. Merchants Brown and Fleming occupied the bottom two floors. On the third floor, where the prisoners were housed, various stands and plat-

forms remained, along with two grand crystal chandeliers. Otherwise it was filthy and looked deserted. In fact, it was crowded with new neighbors who would make their days unbearable and their nights devoid of slumber. The makeshift prison was infested with lice.

Willich's fair, thin skin made him a particularly sweet treat for the ravenous insects. The fifty-two-year-old general was so pestered by his unwelcome bed-

The novelist Augusta Evans paid a call on the prisoners one day. She was among the curious citizens of Atlanta and a steadfast supporter of the Confederacy. James Whelan, the Catholic bishop of Nashville and a strong Union man, also stopped in to chat.<sup>10</sup>

Prisoners had begun arriving in Atlanta in significant numbers during the spring and summer of 1862, following the horrific battle at Shiloh Church,



Brigadier General August Willich in the act of being captured by Confederates at Stones River, Tennessee, December 31, 1862. Drawing by Adolph Metzner. The artist probably did not witness the event.

mates he thought they, rather than the rebel army, would end his time on earth. He procured large quantities of mercurial ointment, which made him gravely ill and did little to alleviate his suffering. After a hospital stay of several days, an emaciated Willich returned to his friends complaining, "If I stay here, the little vermin will kill me. If I use medicine, the medicine kills me. So, I think boys," he whimpered, "I am done for."

Life in the prison was not all pain and drudgery. Captives enjoyed an unlimited supply of gas for the chandeliers, using its bright light to enliven cheery "stag dances" and other amusements. General Willich gave lectures on military tactics. Another officer recited Shakespeare. A third led the prisoners in exercise routines. Inmates enjoyed chess, checkers and cards.

in Tennessee. Atlanta's secret circle of Union supporters did whatever they could do safely to help Federal prisoners as they passed through town. Local Union men, women, and even children took great risks to assist captive Union soldiers by placing money in newspapers, books, and pies on clandestine visits to rail cars and prisons.

One Atlanta newspaper reported with frustration that "respectable" ladies of the community brought bouquets of flowers and strawberries to the Yankee prisoners. Pretty Atlanta girls made fun of the Union soldiers on their walks by the prison. Visits from Confederate officers revealed rumors of a planned Northwest Confederacy. Later investigations would prove such schemes were a real threat.<sup>11</sup>

Food supplied to the prisoners in

Atlanta was barely enough to keep them alive. Once a day, a slave entered the prison with a small supply of boiled beef and cornbread. "Here's your meat, here's your cornbread," the black man exclaimed. Most parolees were allowed to keep money and personal possessions, creating a thriving underground economy in edible contraband. Greenbacks were worth twice their face value in Confederate currency, so captives traded their cash for sweet potatoes, onions, and butter. They concocted a tasty stew, combining these items with meat, cooked together in an oyster can in one of three small fireplaces, using green pine logs as fuel. One or two prisoners at a time were allowed to shop at the market, accompanied by a guard. They paid exorbitant prices for basic foodstuffs. On one such trip, a Union prisoner would get into serious trouble.<sup>12</sup>

Lady luck had smiled upon Lieutenant John F. Elliott of the Thirty-Sixth Illinois Infantry in the weeks before the Murfreesboro campaign. He was flush with gambling winnings when captured, and managed to conceal this fact from his captors. One day in early February, Elliott tried to purchase supplies with a large stash of counterfeit Confederate bills. An Atlanta citizen came to the prison and accused Elliott of trafficking in bogus currency. He was searched, then whisked away to a judge, who indicted him. Elliott was told that he would be tried in civil court on the fourth Monday in March. Elliott's friends feared for his life and immediately began planning his escape.<sup>13</sup> They would get their chance a few weeks later.

On February 25, a Confederate officer entered the prison with welcome news. Willich and his comrades would finally leave for Richmond to be exchanged. The prisoners were in good spirits as they scrambled into boxcars that evening and headed east. Seventy-five officers crammed into one car, including Willich and Lieutenant Elliott. They immediately executed the escape plan.

Elliott changed clothes with Captain D.A. Briggs of the Second Indiana

Cavalry, who somehow acquired a Confederate uniform. Willich gave Elliott a field map. Others supplied him with a pocket compass, a few dry biscuits and nine tattered dollars in genuine Confederate currency.

When the train stopped for water in Conyers, Elliott slipped out the boxcar door and vanished into the night. Thirty days later, after three hundred miles of walking, fording streams and hiding out, he walked into the Union Army's Camp Davis near Corinth, Mississippi, still wearing the purloined rebel uniform. Officers of the Fourth Ohio were rightly suspicious of his story but, fortunately, Elliott's brother Charles was in camp with the Seventh Ohio and vouched for his sibling.<sup>14</sup>

Willich and the rest of the Union prisoners reached Augusta the day after Elliott's escape, lodging in a large warehouse. That evening, Willich found a German inn and enjoyed a brief respite from his troubles with "twelve merry German musicians and a German professor."<sup>15</sup> The next day they hopped aboard passenger cars for the journey across South Carolina. Prisoners foraged for their own vittles when the trains stopped. At Weldon, North Carolina, their patience finally ran out. The captives demanded and received food. Morale improved as they pulled into Richmond. Freedom appeared close at hand.

Such hopes were dashed as the men marched to their new home, the infamous Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia.<sup>16</sup>

Willich endured several months of deprivation in Libby Prison before his exchange in early May 1863. He traveled



The building at right is the former Masonic Hall on Whitehall Street in 1864. Willich and other Union officers were held on the third story of this building, which was used as a storehouse during the Civil War.

to Washington City, but had a difficult time securing a meeting with the War Department. The only man who seemed to share his passion in defeating the rebellion, according to Willich, was the president himself, so he requested an interview with the commander-in-chief. Two days later, on May 8, he met with President Lincoln.<sup>17</sup>

The president listened carefully as Willich described the condition of Richmond and other intelligence he had gathered on his journey across the Deep South. Willich described the region as "a graveyard of walking corpses," with boys and men of all ages "placed in irons and dragged like wild animals from prison to prison because they refuse to enter the army." Rebel officers approached Union prisoners offering to exchange three, four or even five dollars in Confederate currency for one dollar in U.S. greenbacks.<sup>18</sup> Willich compared the Confederacy to "a little bladder filled with very bad air. Once you prick it, it sinks with a great

stink.”<sup>19</sup> The old man told the president that “there was not a sound pair of legs” in Richmond, suggesting that had Union troops known how poorly defended the city was, they “could have fetched Jeff Davis and his consorts out of the city.”<sup>20</sup>

Willich had plenty of advice for the president. He and Mr. Lincoln held similar ideas when it came to politics and war. They also shared a love for colorful imagery in their storytelling. Willich described the war as a battle between a Union elephant and a Confederate dog. The dog constantly harasses the elephant, biting at his feet, while the elephant kicks back, trying to knock him down. The war would not end, Willich told the president, until “the elephant gets mad, drives the dog into a corner, and tramples the life out of the damn beast.”<sup>21</sup> If only Lincoln could get his top generals to act more like raging bull elephants, rather than plodding, annoyed pachyderms, the republican Union could be preserved.

Georgians had not seen the last of August Willich. He performed with typical skill and bravery in a losing effort at the Battle of Chickamauga, covering the retreat of Union forces back to Chattanooga. His was the first brigade to summit Missionary Ridge two months later, helping to drive the Confederates out of east Tennessee and down into Georgia.

In the opening weeks of Union General William T. Sherman’s Atlanta campaign, Willich found himself once again staring down rebels, this time during the Battle of Resaca. On the afternoon of May 15, 1864, the old general dismounted and climbed to the top of a parapet, field glasses in hand, to take stock of the stalemate. He was dressed in his full brigadier general’s uniform, replete with the yellow sash of his office.

Willich’s sash waved in the breeze like a red handkerchief taunting an angry bull.<sup>22</sup> A rebel sharpshooter less than two hundred yards away crouched low, took upward aim at his quarry, and pulled the trigger. A single ball ripped through Willich’s upper right arm near the shoulder, glancing off the bone and exiting his

back below the shoulder blade, barely missing his spine.<sup>23</sup>

The blow knocked Willich off his feet. Adjutant General Carl Schmitt was on the scene and helped carry his wounded commander on a stretcher to the reserve lines. When his men crowded around Willich, a young officer ordered them back, but Willich rebuked him. Despite the pain, he implored his boys to do their duty as if he was still with them and was quickly spirited off to safety.

Willich would never fight again. The rebel ball that pierced his shoulder at Resaca had severed a nerve in his right arm, rendering that limb and hand nearly useless for the rest of his life.<sup>24</sup> Despite successful campaigns throughout the West, August Willich would remember his Civil War experiences in Georgia as frustrating times marked by captivity, defeat, and disability. ■

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## Endnotes

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11. Thomas G. Dyer, *Secret Yankees: The Union Circle in Confederate Atlanta* (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins Press, 1999), 82-96.

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13. Newlin, A history of the Seventy-third regiment of Illinois infantry, 565-6. The account of W.H. Lawrence of J.F. Elliott’s escape differs from the versions related by others, including Elliott and his family. Lawrence claimed the Elliott escaped from the Atlanta prison, whereas other sources insist he escaped from a boxcar.

14. Soldiers’ and patriots’ biographical album containing biographies and portraits of soldiers and loyal citizens in the American conflict, together with the great commanders of the Union Army; also a history of the organizations growing out of the war: The Grand Army of the Republic, The Loyal Legion, The Sons of Veterans, and The Woman’s Relief Corps (Chicago: Union Veteran Publishing Company, 1892), 102-5. Nashville Union, 5 Apr. 1863. St. Charles (Illinois) Chronicle, 21 Sept. 1916.

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16. Newlin, A history of the Seventy-third regiment of Illinois infantry, 567.

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21. *Easton (Maryland) Gazette*, 27 June 1863.

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