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ALBERT WALLBER

Albert Wallber was born in Berlin, Germany, on April 13, 1842. Migrating to America with his family as a child he settled in Milwaukee where, as he grew to adulthood, he found employment as a clerk. When the Civil War began he enlisted in the 26th Wisconsin, rising to the rank of first lieutenant. On the afternoon of July 1, 1863, an artillery shell exploded near him north of Gettysburg as his regiment retired toward town. Knocked unconscious, he fell into rebel hands. Taken to a prisoner holding area behind Seminary Ridge, he later left an interesting description of seeing Maj. Gen. George Pickett before and after his celebrated charge in a paper he read before the Wisconsin Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States on November 7, 1906. Following Gettysburg, the retreating Confederates took Wallber to Libby Prison where he was one of those who successfully escaped through a tunnel in February 1864.¹

“On the morning of July 3rd, lying on the ground near General Pickett’s headquarters, we had a chance to see this officer, as he emerged from his tent; his long locks reaching to his shoulders, artistically arranged, his high riding boots brilliantly polished, his external appearance without a fault, he mounted his horse. In looking at his cheeks and nose, we divined that their color was not caused by drinking soda water only. With a haughty air, imbued with his own importance he galloped to the front, but when we met him a few days later, a dark shadow hovered over his red physiognomy. He lost two thirds of his division on that eventful third of July.



1st Lt. Albert Wallber, Company F, 26th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry. *Germania und Abendpost*.

A dismal silence reigned during that forenoon, the forerunner generally of violent catastrophes. In the afternoon a fearful cannonade was heard, which shook the earth. Our hearts were beating fast, our anxiety was at fever heat, for it was clear to us that this day was significant. We had the presentiment that this would be the critical day, the decisive battle. When night approached, cannon and musketry firing ceased. What was the result? The musicians remained silent. Could we base any hopes on this? No news came to us. In utter despair, tired and hungry, we spent the night lying on the green sward. The sun woke us on July 4th. But what a 4th was this! At home it was a day of jubilation, while here we did not know whether the enemy had not succeeded in shaking the foundation of our republic. We were huddled together on a field, sur-

¹ Albert Wallber, “From Gettysburg to Libby Prison,” *War Papers Read Before the Commandery of the State of Wisconsin, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States* (Milwaukee: Burdick & Allen, 1914), Vol. IV, 191–200; James S. Pula, *The Sigel Regiment: A History of the 26th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, 1862–1865* (Campbell, CA: Savas Publishing Company, 1998), 415.

rounded by a fence, on the outside of which sentinels were posted—weatherbeaten fellows, clad in torn gray garments, who eyed us malignantly. The weather had turned gloomy and we sat around with heavy hearts, wondering what news we would likely hear, when one of our officers, disregarding all possible consequences, gave vent to his feelings and in honor of the day began a patriotic song. We others took courage and all joined in the chorus. The sentinels pricked up their ears, looked at us, but said nothing. This seemed encouraging, for we reasoned that they would hardly permit us to indulge in this harmless pleasure had they been victorious. Their severity was too well known to us, why then in this case were they so lenient? Why could we sing John Brown, and Rally Round the Flag? This leniency must have its reason. Could it mean that they were beaten on July 3rd?

Not long after a curious commotion was visible around us. Troops commenced to maneuver, order-

lies galloped to and fro, and the immense wagon train began to move. Up sprang one of our officers, a typical Yankee, to a mound near by, stretched his long neck and sniffing the air in all directions, concluded his observations by saying: 'Gentlemen, this signifies that they are skedaddling.' He guessed right. Lee was beaten and we were soon ordered to follow the retreating foe. Toward noon a terrible rainstorm broke loose. The road was utilized by the army wagons, batteries and 'prairie schooners'—but not by the ambulances containing the wounded, who moaned piteously as they were driven over the fields at the gallop. The rebels had lost and were fleeing. We rejoiced, although aware what our fate would be, unless our forces attacked the retreating enemy and liberated us. We waited anxiously for the release, but alas, day after day vanished, when we realized that our hope was vain. Our fears for a long imprisonment were to become true."