

## Private Wilson Vance and the Medal of Honor

Story of Pvt. Wilson J. Vance. Co. B, 21st O.V.I. and his Medal of Honor winning exploits at the Battle of Stones River

The following is an excerpt from *A Man and a Boy at Stones River*. The article was written by Wilson J. Vance and first appeared in Blue and Gray magazine in 1893. The story is about an incident that occurred during the Battle of Stones River in which Vance rescues a fellow Union soldier from Confederate capture. This act of bravery eventually won Pvt. Vance the Medal of Honor, which was awarded to him by Congress on September 17, 1897.

The article is rather awkwardly written in the third person, and annoyingly refers to the two main characters as “the Man” and “the Boy.” “The Boy,” of course, is Vance. “The Man,” is Colonel John F. Miller, 29th Illinois Infantry, who commanded the brigade to which the 21st O.V.I. was assigned. At the time, Pvt. Vance was assigned as a mounted orderly for Col. Miller, and was in an excellent position to observe the actions of the men and the battle. In his official report of the battle, Col Miller stated that Vance and Nicholas J. Vail (the soldier that Vance rescued) “deserve honorable mention for their efficiency and bravery. They are both worthy of promotion to the rank of lieutenant.” Five months after the Battle of Stones River, Wilson J. Vance was promoted to 2nd lieutenant of Co. D 21st O.V.I. Thirty years later, Vance’s account of his exploit appeared in print.

The selection here begins at a point where Miller’s brigade is entirely surrounded by the enemy, and actually must break through a Confederate line of battle in their rear in order to effect [sic] a withdrawal.

Like the good captain who is the last one to leave his sinking ship, Col. Miller took his post in the rear of his troops as they forced their way through the enemy’s lines, and of course The Boy was with him. Just as the breach was made, and the soldiers had begun to pour rapidly through, a shrill, piping voice was heard through all the din of the shooting and shouting, calling upon The Boy by name. Looking back, they saw another private soldier belonging to the brigade headquarters, Nicholas Vail, a member of the 19th Illinois, Turchin’s famous regiment, dismounted, and wandering in a dazed, aimless way, almost as near to the Johnnies as he was to us. His blood-drenched sleeve showed that he was wounded, and his actions were those of a man demented.

“He is wounded,” said The Man, “and like a fool has dismounted, or else his horse has been killed.”

“He looks like a crazy man,” replied The Boy.

“Yes, he does; the Johnnies will get him, unless somebody helps him.”

“All right, Colonel,” answered The Boy. “You go ahead. I’ll take care of Nick.”

It was no sooner said than done. Poor Nick had been shot right plumb through the crazy bone, and it seemed as if his elbow joint was shattered. He certainly was a wild man, and extremely difficult to handle, in the limited time which the rapid on coming Confederates were swiftly cutting down.

The Boy dismounted, and by dint of arguing with the crazy fellow and hard pushing, lifting, and shoving, finally had the sufferer in the saddle. He smote the little mare with the flat of his sabre [sic] a resounding thwack across the rump which sent her careening forward after the vanishing blue-coats, and then he glanced over his shoulder to find, to his dismay, that the Johnnies who were shouting to him to “surrender, you little Yankees!” and sending a singing storm of bullets about his ears, were so close that he could almost discern the color of their eyes.

Then began the mad chase for life! The little sorrel had got well away and was fast disappearing with the raving maniac on her back. The Boy ran as he had never run before; and it was no small matter to run at all. The low hanging cedar branches struck him in the breast and scratched his face, while the little boulders tripped him up, and the big ones placed themselves in his blind path to be fallen over. To cap the climax and complete his embarrassment, the great cavalry sabre [sic] which in his boyish ardor he had buckled on, kept thrusting itself between his eagerly active legs. It seemed to The Boy that from one cause or another, he tumbled down at every step; however, as he was a very obstinate boy, and was never more determined in his life that he was on that particular occasion to escape from the Johnnies, he succeeded. He found poor Nick drifting aimlessly about on the little mare’s back, clearly non compos mentis. He caught the mare’s bridle, led her up to a stump, jumped on behind his wounded comrade, and took him to the hospital, a mile or two in the rear, supporting the wounded arm with one hand, and holding the reins with the other. And then giving him a revolver he solemnly adjured him with all his childish earnestness to shoot the surgeon who might attempt to cut his arm off.

[image: photo of a young man in a uniform and cap]

[image: photo of a young man in a uniform]