



# ALLIES

Newsletter for Members and Friends of the Military Historical Society of Minnesota

Allies

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## Thomas Gere: Bravery gets him a Medal of Honor

By Al Zdon

*(Second of two parts)*

Lt. Thomas Gere got what he wanted.

Like the hundreds of other Minnesota youth who had enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War, he wanted to go to war.

Gere's Company B of the Fifth Minnesota Infantry Regiment had first been sent to western Minnesota in what the soldiers assumed was babysitting duty watching over the peaceful Indians in the summer of 1862.

Gere and his comrades, instead of babysitting, found themselves in the middle of the Dakota Uprising, and 24 soldiers from the company were killed. Gere played a critical role in literally "holding down the fort" while reinforcements were sent in.

Now, in November of 1862, the regiment traveled by foot, by steamboat and by train to Chicago, Kentucky and finally to Oxford, Mississippi to join the rest of the regiment. On New Year's Eve, Gere wrote in the journal he kept throughout the war, "We have no baggage, no teams, no rations. We are hunting for the Rebs."

The hunt went on into January. On Jan. 4, he wrote, "All this time we are profoundly ignorant of any object in our movements." Welcome to the Army.

By Jan. 9, the Minnesotans had gone 11 days without provisions. "The poultry yards and bee hives suffered, and every horse found on the trip was taken." On the 12<sup>th</sup>, the regiment finally got its tents, blankets, valises which they had not seen for 23 days. Gere said it was "unspeakable joy."

On Jan. 17, Gere marked his first anniversary in the Army. "The war

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Lt. Thomas Gere in uniform. Minnesota Historical Society photo.



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does not seem so near an end as it did when we enlisted.” The regiment continued to move from area to area around the South without much contact with the enemy.

In a letter to the *Chatfield Democrat* on March 10, Gere said there were 560 men left in the regiment “all ready for a fight.” The toll in his company to that point was fairly grim. They had started with 87 men and now had 52. They had lost those 24 in Minnesota and 11 others to wounds along the way.

On March 18, the regiment’s adjutant quit and Gere, still 20 years old, was made acting adjutant. A week later he became the adjutant.

By May, 1863, the Fifth Minnesota was part of the assault on Vicksburg, and on May 14 the regiment was in the vanguard in the attack on Jackson, Mississippi. “Jackson is ours,” Gere wrote. “And the Fifth has glory enough.” The next day, he observed the deserted state capital city. “State House, Auditor’s Office, K.G.C. (a pro-slavery organization); Senate; soldiers plundering; clothes of all kinds; darkies; women following the crowd for plunder.”

It was rare that the regiment spent more than a few days in one position. On June 20, Gere was able to take a side trip down the bank of the Mississippi opposite the besieged Vicksburg. Using field glasses, he “got a fine view of the town. I could plainly see the Rebs on the other side of the river. This has been one of those romantic days.”

On July 4, Vicksburg fell to Grant’s Army. “Today the Gibraltar has fallen. How I have wished myself at home today.”

In August, 1863, Gere took advantage of a perk available to officers. He went home. By the 18<sup>th</sup>, he had debarked at Winona, and by that evening he was at home in Chatfield with his parents. “Our folks are taken by surprise.”

By September, he was back to war as the Fifth Minnesota seemed to keep constantly on the go in the Vicksburg and Memphis areas. On Dec. 11, they traded in their old Whitney rifles for brand new Springfield.

On April 9, 1864, the Fifth got a good dose of action when it fought in the battle of Pleasant Hill, Louisiana. “The fighting was desperate for about two hours, and the loss was heavy. Charge after charge upon our position attested to the valor of the rebs, but they were completely routed. We drove them more than three miles... The ground was literally strewn with dead and wounded.”

That night, the federal forces retreated in haste, a situation that did not sit well with Gere or his comrades. “At 3 in the morning we left the field leaving our own dead unburied and many wounded uncared for! May I never witness another occasion like this!”

On March 7, Gere was named the acting assistant adjutant of the brigade, working on the staff of Col. Lucius Hubbard, the former commander of the Fifth Minnesota who had been promoted.

The rancor in the troops with their ultimate commander (Maj. Gen. Nathaniel P. Banks) did not abate. On March 10, Gere wrote: “Two months ago today we left Vicksburg. We are tired enough of this country and sick of the way affairs are managed, but willing would stay two months longer if we had a commander to lead us to Shreveport.”

Gere said the problem was not with the troops. “They are desperate and will fight hard if we get a chance.” Banks was eventually removed from command.

In June, the entire regiment went home on a furlough. A clipping from the “St. Louis Daily” in Gere’s journal notes that the regiment had lost 465 men to that point, and that the strength of the unit was down to 247 men.

Gere got home on July 4, 1864, and encountered “dances, parties, boat rides, sweet music and walks.” He wrote about those days in Chatfield as “naught but pleasure, long to be remembered.”

In August, the Fifth Regiment was back in action again, once again in the deep south. In one stretch, from mid-September until Oct. 5, 1864, the regiment marched 307 miles in 19 days. “The command is somewhat ‘used up,’ at least it ‘needs repair;’ many of the men are barefooted and we are on quarter rations.”

On Nov. 25, the regiment experienced something they probably never thought of when they signed up. The unit was aboard a steamship heading north on the Mississippi. “We awoke with a crash and got up in a hurry to find our boat had struck an old wreck and was sinking.” The men were transferred to other



A union officer falls at the Battle of Nashville, 1864. (Harper's Weekly.)

boats, although two drowned in the experience.

By mid-December the Fifth Regiment was entrenched around Nashville facing a Confederate army under the command of Gen. John Bell Hood. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, the Fifth Regiment, as part of the Second Brigade, First Division, 16<sup>th</sup> Army Corps, attacked the Rebel position. Joining the Fifth in the Brigade were the Seventh, Ninth and Tenth Minnesota Regiments.

In letters and in his journal, Gere described the attack. "Our Division is massed; we storm a work of the enemy, carry it; capturing four guns; then another work, and two more guns!" Gere wrote. "Our brigade swings to the left and makes a glorious charge on the rebel line, the enemy runs like sheep, we capture many prisoners. Glorious!"

In the last charge, Gere was struck by a musket ball on his wrist, a troubling but not serious wound.

At 3 a.m., the Fifth Minnesota was awoken by the reveille of the Confederate forces – directly in front of their position. They knew the Rebels were making a stand and the battle will continue. "Everything indicated that the rebel leader had determined to yield no more ground."

The next day dawned fair with scattered clouds, but by three in the afternoon, the sky has darkened and the rain began. The division advanced to about 300 yards from the enemy and was pinned down by rifle fire. At 4 p.m., the order is given to charge across the muddy, open cornfield. The rebel line "burst forth a red and blue flame and the messengers of death fell like hail upon our ranks," he wrote in a letter home.

"A fearful charge, hundreds fell, but we captured the works with prisoners by the thousands. 'Twas a fiery orderal. It was indeed trying to go through that storm of grape, canister, and musket balls – We who got through wonder how we escaped."

Col. Hubbard, leading the Brigade, had two horses shot from under him. Lt. Col. William Gere, Thomas Gere's older brother, led the Fifth Regiment and also lost his horse. Four color sergeants were shot down, and in each case the colors were grabbed by those behind before they could hit the ground. Finally, the Fifth Regiment's colors, riddled with canister shot, stood atop the rebel works. "A wild cheer of triumph soon proclaimed that the works were ours."

As the enemy fled, Gere, on horseback, wheeled and pursued the enemy along the wall and sharpened trees the Confederates had constructed as its defense. "I reached the works to the right of the brigade, but my horse would not cross the abattis and wall." On the other side of the fortifications, the rebels were fleeing. "I was a little in advance of this movement. The color bearer leaped over the works towards our rear with the others, leaving the colors behind the works. I could not reach them, but I compelled him to recross and deliver the flag." He did.

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The flag was that of the Fourth Mississippi Regiment, a veteran unit which, like the Fifth Minnesota, had survived a three years and dozens of battles in the war.

Gere presented the flag to the brigade, a trophy of great value and pride. “While we rejoice at the great victory, our hearts are filled with grief and sorrow for the loss of our fallen companions.” Indeed, the regiment lost 14 killed and 92 wounded, or about 40 percent of its strength.

Gere’s reward for his valor included being put in charge of a contingent of 17 men from the brigade, many of whom had captured rebel battle flags — although Gere was the only one to have captured a regimental flag. The group arrived in Washington D.C. on Feb. 20, and two days later, on Washington’s birthday, he and other flag capturers were ushered into the office of Edwin Stanton, Secretary of War. “The Secretary made up a little speech, thanking us and our commander, and told us we should each have a medal of honor.” They also got a 30-day furlough.

Gere got his photo taken at Matthew Brady’s studio, and headed back to Minnesota. A month later, he rejoined his unit at Spanish Fort, Alabama, and told his brother that there was some trouble at home, which he did not specify in his journal. His brother advised him to quit and take care of his “home duties.”

On April 5<sup>th</sup>, with the war nearly over, Gere mustered out after three years, two months and 20 days of service. On his way home, he first learned the news of Lee’s surrender, and then, days later, of the assassination of Lincoln.

He finally got home to Chatfield on May 15. He was 22 years old.

“I lay aside the trappings of the ‘grim visage war,’ hang up my sword to rust on the wall and become a quiet citizen.

‘Never again to dream the dream,  
That martial music weaves.’”

Gere lived to be 69 years old. He went into the railroad business in Iowa after the war, first as a surveyor and later as an executive. He was superintendent of the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railroad, and later was president of the Sioux City and Northern Railroad. He founded the National Linseed Oil Co.

Gere married Florence Howard in 1868, but their child died in 1870 and Florence died of tuberculosis a year later. In 1874, Gere married Mary Emma Sheppard, and they had three children.

He is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.



Thomas Gere’s grave at Arlington Cemetery.

### Sources:

*Journal Kept by Captain T.P. Gere during the Civil War. Life in “Uncle Sam’s Army.”* The William B. and Thomas P. Gere Papers, Minnesota Historical Society collections. The Journal was originally a pocket diary written in pencil, but Gere transcribed it using a typewriter in 1865. Attached to the journal are various newspaper clippings and letters.

## Give to the Max Day in November 14

This year’s Give to the Max Day is Thursday, November 14, 2013. Give to the Max Day was created in 2009 to increase giving to nonprofit organizations across Minnesota and move more giving online. It is a day for Minnesotans to come together to raise as much money as possible for nonprofits and schools in 24 hours – starting at midnight on November 14, 2013 through midnight on November 15, 2013. During last year’s Give to the Max Day, a record 53,339 donors logged on and gave \$16.3 million to nonprofit organizations and schools statewide. Over \$4,000 was given to the Minnesota Military Museum that day.

Please help again this year. To participate, go to [GiveMN.com](http://GiveMN.com) and type in Minnesota Military Museum as your “cause.” Or, go to our homepage at [mnmilitarymuseum.org](http://mnmilitarymuseum.org) and click on the Give to the Max Day logo.

## Curator's Notes By Doug Bekke



Over the summer a good deal of the curatorial time was devoted to restoration and conservation of firearms in the collection. Some have been in the collection for many years awaiting attention but others are new to the collection.

An assessment was made of each piece, its documentation was verified, and, as needed, they were then given in depth, detailed cleaning. Missing parts were found and purchased (to include correct slings and cleaning rods etc.), and appropriate pieces were prepared for exhibit.

This fall it is hoped to add several weapons to the museum's exhibits: a U.S. M17A1 30 cal. machine gun, a U.S. M-2, 50 cal. machine gun, a German WWII MP44 Sturmgewehr, and a Chinese copy of a PPSH captured in Korea.

Over the years I have received several questions on the tan, rusty piece of artillery, missing wheels, on "display" behind the 40&8 Boxcar. It is a WWI German 15 cm Howitzer, the equivalent of the U.S. 155 Howitzer. This has been a problem for me for many years. How to get it restored to a presentable condition?

Since it is missing the wheels and hubs, how do we accurately recreate the hubs to start refabricating the wheels? Years ago I went to the National WWI museum in Kansas City to make sketches and take measurements from the wheels in that collection. I also photographed the 15cm wheels and hubs at the museum at Verdun. These could be used to make blue prints, but how accurate could they be?

In September I was back on the Somme battlefield in France and I noticed some old rusty hubs sitting against a wall in the B&B where I stayed. One of them looked like the correct hub for the 15cm Howitzer. I checked the measurements and photographs and it was in fact the needed hub. The owner said they belonged to her son who had collected them and many other things off the battlefield. He told me that in WWI there had been a German Artillery position not far from the house and he found one of the hubs there a few years ago.

He agreed to donate the hub. It will need a lot of work, but it can serve as a model for the fabrication of the second hub. It is going to be a lot of work, but it would be nice to have this Howitzer finished for the opening of the WWI Exhibit in 2016.

Any wheelwrights out there looking for a big project to work on?

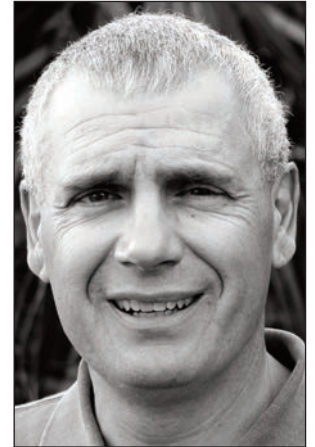
This is an extreme, but good example of the effort we put in to collect, restore and preserve the artifacts in our collection.

## Summer Ice Cream Social a big success

Over 250 visitors attended the first annual Ice Cream Social at the Minnesota Military Museum this past July. The Little Falls Dairy Queen provided free root beer floats to everyone attending and local Boy Scouts served up burgers and brats. The weather cooperated with a perfect summer evening. Over \$500.00 was raised at the excess book sale with Roxanne Backowski managing the sale wearing a WWII WAC uniform. Special thanks also to Craig Johnson who tolerated the heat dressed in his wool Civil War uniform and gave musket firing demonstrations every half hour. Doug Thompson was also a hit with his WWII Marine uniform and machine gun pit. Everyone attending was also treated to numerous C130 flybys directly overhead as pilots practiced their touch and go landings.

# Director's Update

By Jeff Thielen



I don't know about you, but fall has always been my favorite season of the year. So far this fall has met all expectations, and the mushroom picking has been fantastic. As the director of this organization, it is a time when I pause and reflect on another summer season at the museum.

Although the season started a little slowly, we definitely ended with a large bang with the biennial Camp Ripley Open House on September 15. Our museum headcount for that date was just under 1,700 people. This is a "free" day for admission to the museum and we receive great exposure from individuals who may not visit otherwise. I had the opportunity to greet many of the visitors as they entered and told them there was no admission fee; however, as a non-profit we appreciated their donations.

One of the biggest misconceptions we face in our fund raising efforts is informing potential donors we are not funded by the military. Although buildings are provided by Camp Ripley along with utilities and grounds maintenance, we are responsible for securing the money needed for our operational expenses, including all exhibit construction and our largest expense, staff support.

I learned long ago the biggest cost to organizations that provide a service is supporting a staff to provide that service. Our service is to educate the public on the service of Minnesota's veterans, to preserve a record of their service through exhibits of the Minnesota Military Museum, and to preserve the artifacts related to their service for future generations.

If you are reading this as a non member and are interested in supporting our service, I encourage you to become a member. If you are a member, I encourage you to consider an extra gift to the museum as we approach the end of the tax year. I also encourage you to think about supporting what we do in your estate planning.

So as you enjoy this great fall we are having, remember that it is also the time when budgets are developed for the upcoming year and that as a non-profit we appreciate every gift you are able to provide to support the services we provide. Thank you.

## Memorials July – September, 2013

**Given by:**

Harold Fiala  
Paul Monteen  
Jeff Thielen  
Nicholas and Joan Ostapenko  
Richard and Betty Hayes

**In Memory of:**

Helen Bekke  
Helen Bekke  
Helen Bekke  
Helen Bekke  
James Strowbridge



**MASONIC DONATION --** For the third year in a row, Minnesota Masonic Charities and the Grand Lodge of Minnesota have made matching \$5,000 contributions to be used for care and processing of the museum's artifacts. Jeff Thielen, left, and Doug Bekke, right, accept checks from Masonic representatives Steven Johnson and Dave Olson.

## Artifact Donation Honor Roll July – September, 2013

*The museum gratefully acknowledges donations of artifacts from the following:*

Roger Avery ▪ Lois Brenner ▪ Dr. Dan Conlon ▪ Harold Fiala ▪ Kyle Hawkinson ▪ Clifford Johnson ▪ Shane Johnson ▪ Terrence Johnson ▪ Richard Klobuchar ▪ Ronald Lachelt ▪ Bill Leach ▪ Robert Meisch ▪ Matthew Miller ▪ Martha Murrey ▪ Michael Nash ▪ Thomas Northenscold ▪ Cy Valerius ▪ Shirley Warner ▪

## Artifact Donations July – September, 2013

*Uniforms:* Belt, German Army ▪ Belt, USN dress white ▪ Cap, overseas (2) ▪ Cap, German Labor Corps ▪ Hat, WWII German rabbit fur ▪ Jacket, Eisenhower ▪ Jacket, German Labor Corps ▪ Jacket, USN dress blue (2) ▪ Jacket, USN dress white ▪ Low quarters, USN white ▪ Necktie ▪ Shirt, BDU ▪ Shirt, tan (2) ▪ Shirt, white ▪ Trousers, BDU ▪ Trousers, tan ▪ Trousers, USN dress blue ▪ Trousers, USN dress white ▪

*Equipment:* Canteen ▪ Case, map ▪ Compass, US Army wrist ▪ Footlocker ▪ Helmet, German Police ▪ Quarter, shelter ▪

*Miscellaneous:* Arm Bands, German (3) ▪ Badge, Civil War Confederate ▪ Books ▪ Cuff links ▪ Cummerbund ▪ Documents ▪ Fabric, painted Korean ▪ Flags ▪ Nazi/German lapel pin ▪ Manuals ▪ Maps ▪ Medals ▪ Patches ▪ Pendant ▪ Photos ▪ Rank, collar ▪ Ribbons ▪ Scrapbooks ▪ Shoulder boards

*Weapons and related items:* Casing, shell ▪ Pistol, M-1911 ▪ Rifle cover, WWII ▪ Sturmgewehr, MP43 ▪

## Contributions Honor Roll July – September, 2013

*Renewing Members:* Win Anderson ▪ Roger Avery ▪ Russell Beddow ▪ Adrian Beltrand ▪ William Casey ▪ Mae Dobbs ▪ Harold Fiala ▪ Jack Heidman ▪ Kurt Hoehne ▪ Charles Kapsner ▪ Eugene Leifeld ▪ Jean McDonald ▪ Larry Mongan ▪ Donald Pettitt ▪ Robert Purcell ▪ Susan Rasmussen ▪ John Sturner ▪ Robert Swetz Sr. ▪ Jo Teare ▪

*New Members:* Robyn Starfield

*American Legion:* Post 241, Aurora ▪ Post 46, Little Falls ▪ Sons of the American Legion Post 290, Isanti ▪ Post 234, Minneapolis ▪ Post 550, Minneapolis ▪ Post 168, St. Paul ▪

*VFW:* Post 1720, Grand Rapids ▪ Post 1210 Auxiliary, Hastings ▪ Post 2735, Isanti ▪ Post 1140 Auxiliary, Long Prairie ▪

*Donations:* Alex Aldama ▪ Andy Allen ▪ Greg and Sarah Anderson ▪ Mark Anderson ▪ Matt Anderson ▪ Steve Anderson ▪ Alissa Baugh ▪ William Beery ▪ Gary Bell ▪ Adrian Beltrand ▪ Jim Bennett ▪ Robert Boone ▪ Brainerd Sertoma Club ▪ William Casey ▪ Don Christianson ▪ Jim Chyba ▪ Tim Cisar ▪ Duane Clear ▪ Kenny Day ▪ Stephen Else ▪ Chris Evans ▪ Grand Lodge A. F. & A.M. of Minnesota ▪ Jeff and Misty Greenley ▪ Janet Haigler ▪ Bob Heidelberger ▪ Jack Heidman ▪ George Jansky ▪ Cliff Johnson ▪ Rick Kleis ▪ Kari Krogstad ▪ Ward Lamb ▪ Don Letendre ▪ Duane Lorusung ▪ Nick Majerus ▪ Paul Marte ▪ Betty Masoner ▪ Lorraine Meyer ▪ Steven Much ▪ Dianne McMurray ▪ Minnesota Masonic Charities ▪ MN Law Enforcement Memorial Association ▪ Richard Nash ▪ Ryan and Bobbi Jo Nash ▪ Niswala Lions ▪ Nicholas Ostapenko ▪ Steve Pederson ▪ Ken Perry ▪ Michael Quinn ▪ Jeff Roberts ▪ Rick Sanchez ▪ Joel and Sharon Schulze ▪ Connor Sheldon ▪ Judy Sorenson ▪ Jasmine Tapia ▪ Tim Thomes ▪ David Torgelson ▪ Shirley Warner ▪ Nathan Wass

## ALLIES

**Allies** is published for the members and friends of the Minnesota Military Museum.

Nicholas Ostapenko, **President**  
Jeff Thielen, **Executive Director**  
Doug Bekke, **Curator**  
Chad Conrady, **Archivist**  
Sandy Erickson, **Administrator**  
Al Zdon, **Editor**

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## Chad Conrady joins MMM staff as archivist

Chad Conrady has joined the staff as Archivist for the Military Historical Society of Minnesota and the Minnesota Military Museum. He replaces Lee Smith, who served as the museum's Archivist in a volunteer capacity for the past 15 years.

Conrady began work September 9 following a nationwide search. It is a full-time, paid position—the museum's first full-time appointment thanks to a special appropriation by the Legislature. Chad worked as Assistant Archivist for the Wisconsin Historical Society for the past three and a half years helping to digitize its archival collections. His volunteer and internship experiences include projects with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, the University of Wisconsin, and Minnesota's Scott County Historical Society. He has a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire; a master's degree in War Studies from the University of Glasgow; and a Certificate of Advanced Studies in Archives and Records Administration from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He is a member of the Academy of Certified Archivists.

As Archivist, Chad will be responsible for collecting, managing, preserving, and keeping a record of the museum's growing archival collection, which includes paper records, documents, letters, diaries and scrap books, newspapers, pamphlets, maps, posters, photographs, tapes, films, disks, and other relevant print or electronic material of an archival nature that reflect Minnesota's military history. These materials provide a tangible record of that history and will be used by the Archivist and others to conduct research and support the museum's broader mission. Creating a comprehensive digital inventory of currently held materials is high on Chad's priority list. "I really look forward to getting started on all the tasks that need to be done," says Chad, "but I will begin with basic paper records before tackling the photographs and other kinds of material. I expect to implement archival policies that are used throughout the world, such as appraising items for their historical value, and creating electronic finding aids."



**CHAD CONRADY**