



# ALLIES

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

Allies

Summer, 2013

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## Thomas Gere: 19 years old and in charge of a fort

By Al Zdon

*(Part 1 of 2 parts)*

Thomas Parke Gere was one of the rare Minnesota soldiers who distinguished himself both in the Indian Wars and the Civil War.

Gere earned a Medal of Honor at the Battle of Nashville in December 1864 for capturing a Rebel flag.

But two and one-half years before that act of gallantry, he was a young officer with the mumps who found himself in charge of a fort on edge of the frontier when the largest American Indian uprising to that point in U.S. history took place.

Gere was born in Wellsburg, Chemung County, in western New York on Sept. 10, 1842. He had moved to Winona, Minnesota, with his family in 1852 and to Chatfield in Fillmore County in 1854 when he was 12. In 1862, he enlisted in Company B of the Fifth Minnesota Infantry Regiment. He was 19 years old, and he was following in the footsteps of his older brother, William, who was already an officer in the regiment.

Gere had to get a letter of permission signed by his father and witnessed by his brother to sign up. The idea was that William, known as "Beecher" to Thomas, an attorney in civilian life, would look after his little brother.

"Hurrah, today I have signed the muster roll," he wrote on Jan. 17, 1862. The Chatfield company was sent to Fort Snelling where, Gere reported, "All the boys are contented and full of fun." There was plenty of training, but there was also time for snowball fights, clandestine trips to Mendota for whiskey, razzing the new recruits, and a visit to Minnehaha Falls to see that wonder of nature.



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

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### Points of Interest

Director's report 6

Curator's Notes 5

New feature at Civil War exhibit 4

Story continues on next page

**ALLIES**

His rise through the ranks was meteoric in the wartime army. He enlisted as a private, but soon became the acting company first sergeant. On March 27, when one of the officers resigned, Gere was elected by his comrades to replace him and become a second lieutenant – the same day his brother was promoted to major. He sometimes wrote of himself in the third person, and on that day he wrote, “Such good fortune is more than he deserves; may he bear his honors as becomes a soldier.”

In late March, the soldiers got some awful news. Instead of heading off to the glory and honor of the Civil War, Company B was assigned to relieve two companies of men of the 4th Minnesota Regiment who were garrisoned at Fort Ridgely.

The fort had been built between 1853-55 to provide a federal presence near the two large Dakota reservations along the Minnesota River. Over the years it had seen such notable officers as Napoleon Dana, Lewis Armistead, Thomas W. Sherman, and John C. Pemberton.

The fort itself was a disappointment to Gere and his comrades when they arrived on March 29. Originally planned to include block houses and palisades like a real fort, in the end it was simply a cluster of buildings, reflecting more of an administrative than a fighting role with the peaceful Dakota. It was, Gere wrote in his journal, “away in the wilderness.”

The men spent their time doing guard duty, drills, inspections and more training. Gere commented on the plains climate: “The average number of windy days in a week being eight and one half.” The men chafed at their duty and ached to be in the real war. “We long to be in one of the glorious fights that impend.”

In June, mom and dad arrived from Chatfield to visit Gere. Not long after that, Gere’s men honored him with a gift of a sword and sash, befitting an officer. “Fortune seems to smile continually on me; is she reserving her frowns for the future?”

On June 28, the regiment’s Company C, which was garrisoned at Fort Ripley, about 120 miles to the northeast as the crow flies, arrived at Ridgely to help Company B with distributing the \$70,000 treaty annuity that was expected to arrive any day. On the 30th, a portion of Company B under Gere’s command (Captain Marsh stayed at the fort) and Company C left for the Upper Sioux Agency some 50 miles away. “We left the fort as gay as a picnic party” and arrived at the agency on July 2.

Gere found the Indians to be friendly. They only asked the soldiers to keep the traders at bay when the annuity payments were made, but by July 19, with no annuity payment in sight, the friendly atmosphere seemed to change. The soldiers at the agency sent for another howitzer “fearing there is going to be some trouble.” On the 22nd, the second cannon arrived at the upper agency.

On August 24th, Gere saw a sight few American soldiers had ever seen. A Dakota war party headed out to seek some Ojibways that had been raiding to the north. The party was 1,000 strong with over 400 mounted, “like so many demons. They poured over the hills armed to the teeth, some stripped to the skin. I shall never forget this day.”

On the 26th, the soldiers helped count the Indians, family by family, in preparation for giving out the payment, which still had not arrived. It took over 12 hours to do the census. On the 28th, Company C’s Lt. Sheehan took 14 men on a mission to capture Chief Ink-Pa-Du-Ta “dead or alive” for inciting unrest among the Dakota bands. Sheehan came back on August 3 without finding the chief.

Things started to come to a head on Aug. 4 when 600 to 800 Dakota surrounded the stone warehouse saying they were just peaceably gathering. Suddenly one of the warriors drove a hatchet into the warehouse door. “I saw at once we had been deceived and I ordered the boys of Company B to fall into line.”

As the soldiers got into formation, the Indians broke down the door and started looting the warehouse. The Dakota were “cocking and priming their guns.”

A sergeant led a group of 16 men to the warehouse, and “put every Indian out. Twas a gallant and dangerous act.”

The situation was tense, with conferring going on between the chiefs, the agent, and the military. Lt. Sheehan and the Indian agent in particular were at odds about what to do, and Sheehan finally sent Gere back to Fort Ridgely to get Captain Marsh to weigh in on the issue.

Gere left in the late afternoon and arrived back at the fort at 3 a.m. By 5 a.m., he and Marsh were headed back to the Upper Agency. The round trip, Gere wrote, had covered 104 miles in 21 hours – riding



Fort Ridgely as it would have looked in 1862. Minnesota Historical Society Photo.

mules.

Marsh was able to calm the situation and convince the agent to give out some of the goods on August 6 as promised in the treaty. The Dakota bands went home. By the 12th of August, the soldiers were back at Ridgely, still waiting for the \$70,000 in gold which was now long overdue.

Gere said it looked like peace would triumph, and on the 17th, Company C set out for Fort Ripley. That same day, a group of 50 recruits, called the “Renville Rangers,” passed through the fort heading for Fort Snelling.

On Monday, August 18, a clear and warm day, “How rudely we were awakened from our dream.”

At 10:20 a.m., an “almost breathless messenger” arrived with the first news of the uprising at the Lower Agency. Marsh acted quickly and set off a half hour later with 47 men for the agency’s small cluster of buildings, about 12 miles away. He also sent word to the Ripley soldiers to return immediately.

As Marsh headed out, he was met by “scores of affrightened citizens.”

Gere was now in charge of the fort with 24 men – no walls, no moat, and dozens of terrified civilians pouring into the post every hour. He faced, in his own words, “the most widespread and horrid Indian massacre that ever desolated the American frontier.”

In an account he wrote later in life, Gere again referred to himself in the third person: “The lieutenant in whose command the fort had been left and under whose charge the distressed and terror-stricken aggregate of men, women and children, was but 19 years of age, one of the patriotic boy volunteers for the army of the Union.”

At noon that day, ironically, the gold finally arrived from Fort Snelling, but it was “wisely concluded to go no further.”

By evening, there were 200 panicky settlers at the fort, and not one word from Marsh. And while all this was going on, Gere himself was seriously ill with the mumps.

Finally, two exhausted men from Marsh’s command staggered into the fort and told Gere that Marsh was dead, as was most of his command. They had been ambushed at a ferry crossing over the Minnesota River, and, while trying to lead his men on an escape, Marsh had drowned.

“It was not deemed possible that it had assumed proportions beyond control.” Gere said, “It rendered the situation profoundly trying.”

It was, Gere later wrote, “a tale whose import in view of the possible consequences to the frightened and well nigh unprotected mass of humanity then there, sufficient to appall the stoutest heart.”

The young officer did what he could, though. He posted the men in picket positions all around the fort, with orders to run back to the buildings if shots were fired.

Not long after, a civilian on guard duty thought he saw something and yelled, “Indians!”

“The scene that ensued defied description. There were men in terror breaking through the windows to get inside.” Gere determined it was a false alarm, and again sent out the pickets – but this time only the trained soldiers. “Each moment’s flight was watched by the little garrison with desperate resolve.”

Gere had all the women and children brought into the stone barracks at the center of the fort. As the night wore on, more and more stragglers came in.

Gere also sent word to Governor Alexander Ramsey by way of a memorable 115-mile horse ride by Private William Sturgis. “A mounted courier was dispatched in hot haste.” Along the way, Sturgis encountered the Renville Rangers and had them turn around.

On Tuesday, Gere and others at the fort could see the Dakota warriors to the west in the plains, led by their chief Little Crow, gathering in plain view to discuss strategy. Had they attacked at that moment, the

## ALLIES

odds would not have been good for the little garrison. However, they instead chose to attack New Ulm and other places, and leave the fort for later.

By early afternoon, Company C returned to the fort after a forced march of some 50 miles. "It was the first news to impart hope to its distressed inmates." They had marched all night. At about 6 p.m., the Renville recruits arrived.

Gere, who had done well in keeping order, keeping the civilians under control, and preparing a defense, was now relieved of command by Lt. Sheehan, his superior in rank. The force at the fort now included about 190 men including armed civilians.

Despite the military architecture, or lack thereof, the little fort was not without its defenses. It had two 12 lb. howitzers, two six-pounders and one 24-pounder. When the Dakota did attack on Wednesday at about noon with 500 warriors, the cannon were used to good effect. Gere led the troops at the northwest entry into the fort, armed with one cannon and a force of riflemen.

There were six hours of "incessant combat." The soldiers stood their ground.

The women in the stone barracks occupied themselves by making artillery cartridges and case shot. "The prayers and tears of the unemployed lent pathos to a scene whose dramatic equal the American Frontier had never witnessed."

On Friday, the Dakota returned, this time in greater numbers, perhaps 700-800 warriors strong. But again the cannon and the determined army and civilian defenders kept them at bay.

There were no more attacks, but the siege went on until Aug. 27 when soldiers from Fort Snelling, under the command of Henry Sibley, finally arrived "amid cheers and tears of joy."

Sibley, with 1,600 troops, was able to defeat the Dakota in the Battle of Wood Lake on Sept. 23. The fighting was over. Many Dakota surrendered and others were captured. Over 300 Dakota were convicted in abbreviated trials and sentenced to die. In the end, with the intervention of President Abraham Lincoln, 38 actually were hung at Mankato.

Gere had seen his first action as an officer, and had performed well. His leadership was critical in the early hours.

Company B finally left the fort on Nov. 9, with high hopes of getting into the real war. They first, though, had to escort 1,800 Dakota women and children to Fort Snelling, where they were interred below the fort through that winter.

Gere was promoted to first lieutenant on Nov. 16 and named the regimental adjutant. By Dec. 16, 1862, the Fifth Regiment was in Oxford, Mississippi. And next month, you'll learn the rest of the story.

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### 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.

*A Scrap of History*, by Thomas P. Gere, The William B. and Thomas P. Gere Papers, Minnesota Historical Society collections. Gere wrote this war memoir late in life for his hometown newspaper, the *Chatfield News-Democrat*.

## Interactive feature added to Civil War exhibit

In May 2013, a new touch screen monitor was added to our special exhibit "Minnesota's Two Civil Wars." Designed to encourage students and other visitors to further explore these topics, the touch screen marks the first time we have introduced a computer-based interactive feature to any of our exhibits. Programs include music of the Civil War, animated battles, loading and firing muskets and cannons, and Minnesota's battle flags.

More interactive programs will soon be added.

## Curator's Notes

By Doug Bekke

Last month the museum received a large donation of books (about 1,200) and documents (about 70 three ring binders) from Dr. Dan Conlon. In 1966, during the Vietnam War, Dr. Conlon was working at an inner city clinic in Minneapolis. President Johnson determined that doctors were needed to support the war effort. Despite being in his mid 30's, married, and having three children, he was drafted into the Air Force. As was the policy for doctors, he received a direct commission to captain and received a year of training in the United States. In 1967 he was sent to Vietnam and assigned to the airfield at Pleiku in the central highlands. While there, he became deeply involved with the Montagnards in the villages surrounding the base. Dr. Conlon departed Vietnam in early 1968 -- watching some of the first North Vietnamese/Viet Cong artillery rounds of the 1968 Tet offensive hit the base as his plane took off.



Dr. Conlon was discharged and returned to his family and his medical practice in Minneapolis. His experiences in Vietnam and especially with the Montagnards soon took a back seat to his immediate concerns of family and work, but the experiences never left him and remained a formative event in his life. Over many years he amassed a huge library of books and reference material, which he studied and used to write a book on his experiences.

Dr. Conlon's book, "A Man Who Walks," has just been published by Praetorian Gate Press. It is an excellent read, and is available in hard cover through most commercial book retailers. It is also available as an e-book.

Having finished his book Dr. Conlon needed to do something with his library which was in storage in Plato, MN. He visited and contacted several libraries. Eventually it was determined that the Minnesota Military Museum would be a good home for the books and papers. With this donation the Minnesota Military Museum now probably has one of the finest Vietnam libraries in the world.

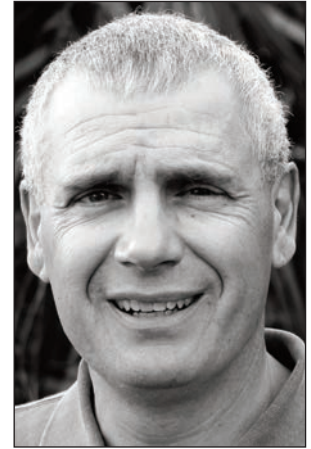
Thank you, Dr. Conlon.

In June I spent two weeks in France, mostly in Normandy but also a few days on the Marne and in Paris. In commemoration of the events of June 1944, Normandy was festooned with French, American, British, and Canadian flags marking the 69th anniversary of the battles in Normandy. Monuments and cemeteries were beautifully maintained, and covered in flowers. As has always been my experience, the French were wonderfully friendly and welcoming. Commemorative ceremonies were held on the Norman beaches and in the towns. Military contingents were present from France, Holland, and in an act of reconciliation, from Germany. Sadly, and to my embarrassment, the United States was only marginally represented. The French were miffed. My fellow travelers and I were embarrassed. The "sequester," and the need to save money for next year's 70th anniversary, were cited as the reason the United States could not be appropriately represented.

With the many billions of dollars being spent in the defense budget it was embarrassing to think that a platoon size element, already stationed in Europe, couldn't be sent to Normandy for a few days to represent the Nation and the brave veterans who fought and shed their blood in Normandy 69 years ago.

## Director's Update

By Jeff Thielen



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Great things have been happening at the museum lately.

The big news is an increase in our biennial appropriation from the Minnesota Legislature for the next biennium. Our funding is referred to as a “pass through” appropriation because we receive it via the Minnesota Historical Society, which serves as our fiscal agent with the Legislature. Since our first appropriation in 1978 (\$5,000) the amount has grown to help meet growing expenses. During the current biennium we received \$90K or \$45K per year. This covers approximately 18% of our operational costs. For the upcoming two-year biennium we will be receiving \$220K or \$120K per year. Of this total, \$60K per year is new money allocated specifically to support an Archivist position. We asked the Legislature to help us manage our growing archival collection and they responded to our request with the additional funding.

This will be our first full-time position at the museum and we have been busy processing applications. Interviews will be held in early August and hopefully someone will be in the position by early September.

A big thank you to Lee Smith, board member and volunteer archivist for all he has done over the years to maintain the archives. He has agreed to familiarize the new Archivist with our collection and to assist as needed. He has also taken on the role of Historian for the museum.

We have begun production of a virtual tour that will be utilized to promote the museum with Veterans Support and Service organizations around the state. The virtual tour will be between 12-15 minutes on DVD and also posted online. This film was made possible because of a recent grant from Veterans 4 Veterans.

Our Veterans Support Wall continues to grow as more people add their Gold Dog Tags to our wall. We are working to develop a computer support system to maintain the information each veteran provides us for the database. We want to establish our veterans’ database so that it can be viewed on line similar to a site maintained by the Veterans Memorial Hall in Duluth. Check out <http://www.vets-hall.org/stories>

As I write this, plans continue for our first Ice Cream Social at the museum on Tuesday evening July 16, from 5 to 9 pm. Free root beer floats will be provided by the Little Falls D. Q. and the Boy Scouts will be selling hot dogs and brats. The evening will include uniformed re-enactors, a huge books sale, and other special attractions.

We recently had over 30 St Cloud Lions Club members enjoy an evening tour at the museum after busing to Camp Ripley, having a beverage in the new Viking Club and a great catered meal by the Ripley Snack Bar. If you are a member of an organization and would like a special tour for your group that would include beverages and a meal, please let me know and I will assist you in making arrangements. The Lions enjoyed rubbing shoulders with the troops in the Viking Club, were impressed by the museum, and vowed to return next year. They also provided us with a check for \$1000.00. Thank you, Lions!

Have a great summer. Stop by the museum and say hello if you are in the area.

## Memorials April – June, 2013

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### April – June, 2013

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## Artifact Donations

### April – June, 2013

**Uniforms:** Blouse, USA uniform (5) ▪ Blouse, USMC uniform ▪ Boots ▪ Cap, German M43 WWII ▪ Hat (4) ▪ Kepi, officer's ▪ Overcoat, Romanian ▪ Overcoat, USA ▪ Shirt ▪ Tie (2) ▪ Trousers (4) ▪

**Equipment:** Backpack, German WWII ▪ Bag, USMC ▪ Cover, canteen ▪ Flashlight ▪ Hammock ▪ Helmet, Bulgarian (3) ▪ Saddle ▪

**Miscellaneous:** Badges ▪ Beer bottles ▪ Books ▪ Coins ▪ Dog tags (2) ▪ Patches ▪ Souvenir coconut ▪ Insignia ▪ Maps ▪ Medals ▪ Papers ▪ Photographs ▪ Plaques ▪ Posters ▪ Survival cards ▪ Technical manuals ▪ Souvenir towel (2) ▪ Videotapes ▪ Walker ▪ Wheelchair

**Weapons and related items:** Bag, ammunition ▪ Bayonet (10) ▪ Belt, cartridge ▪ Carbine, US M1A1 non gun ▪ Casings, shell ▪ Cleaning tool ▪ Footlocker ▪ Pistol, Derringer 1857 ▪ Pistol, Mauser broomhandle non gun ▪ Pistol, 38 Webley non gun ▪ Rifle, German Gewehr 88 ▪ Rifle, Italian model 1891 ▪ **Weapons and related items:** Casing, brass 105 mm artillery shell ▪ Magazines, Luger pistol (2) ▪ Magazine, M-14 rifle ▪ Magazine, Mauser rifle (3) ▪ Pistol, Luger w/holster ▪ Pouch, ammunition (2) ▪ Rifle, Mauser w/bayonet ▪