

# FIRST BROTHERS

By Craig Paulson

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# DEDICATION



I dedicate this book to the First Minnesota Infantry  
Regiment and the many Native American warriors  
who have served their country.



# 1



## FIRST BLOOD

BORN ON THE STEEP WESTERN BANKS of the St. Croix River, Alexander Johnson, like many boys, dreamt of adventure. He grew up to smell of wood smoke in winter and sawdust in summer.

After ice out rafts of white pine from the north filled the river, lumberjacks floated mile long rafts of timber into town from the northern Anishinaabe lands. Sawmills transformed the logs into lumber to build the burgeoning state.

Minnesota became a state on the eleventh of May 1858. Stories about the days before it was admitted to the U.S. fascinated young Alexander. Before statehood, friends visited the family's Stillwater home in the evenings. Over coffee, the talk turned to politics. Alexander listened. He heard many stories, including the tale of two separate state constitutional conventions, one Republican and one Democratic. The convention delegates refused to meet in a joint session. A committee of members from each party negotiated the details of the constitution. Republican party delegates signed the constitution written on white paper. Democratic Party delegates signed the constitution written on blue paper.

On many nights Alexander's mother, Francis, shared the latest news about abolition. She followed the writings of abolitionist Jane Gray Swisshelm. As the editor of the St. Cloud newspaper, Swisshelm

had a forum for advocating her views. Alexander's parents, their friends, and most Minnesotans favored abolition.

Francis was a schoolteacher educated in Massachusetts. Her father, Franklin, encouraged her to attend common school in Massachusetts. Upon graduation, she accepted a teaching position in the Minnesota Territory, where she met Peter Johnson. Peter worked at the Stillwater penitentiary. Looming over the north end of town, the Minnesota State Prison momentarily reminded lumberjacks that camp rules weren't the only laws to follow, something they soon forgot in the many saloons lining Stillwater's main street.

For reasons he never disclosed, Peter immigrated from Trondheim, Norway. A skilled horseman, Peter gained employment as a log skidder in the Wisconsin lumber camps. Through merit, he rose to become a skidder foreman. This led to a position as a stable master at the territorial prison. A married co-worker arranged for Peter and Francis to dine together at his home. They fell in love and wed. On Valentine's Day 1840, Alexander was born.

Alexander stood five-feet, nine-inches tall. He had a medium build, with a round face and his father's jutting square jaw, hazel eyes, light brown hair, and a pale, blotchy reddish complexion. Alexander had a trusting nature and pleasant smile. He worked as a bank clerk, dreaming of something more.

In 1861 Minnesotans yearned to assert themselves in national issues. When the war broke out, Minnesota was pro-Union. Gov. Alexander Ramsey volunteered a thousand Minnesota soldiers for the Union cause. Alexander Johnson enlisted.

After he enlisted, the family discussed his decision at dinner. His mother opposed his enlistment. She cried. His father, Peter, stated to his mother, "You taught him to think for himself, and that's what he is doing." The truth of Peter's words calmed Alexander's mother. And, despite her misgivings, she knew if no one enlisted, slavery would

not be abolished. Alexander and hundreds of young Minnesotans were the first to volunteer for the Union.

Alexander would be part of the Stillwater Guard in the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment. The Stillwater enlistees selected Capt. Bradley as commander. He had earned a reputation for fairness and righteous judgment as manager of the largest hotel in Stillwater, The Potter House. Those elected as sergeant included Thomas Povich, who oversaw a construction crew at the prison. He knew Peter Johnson, Alexander's father. Sgt. Povich had a stocky build. With his large curled-at-the-edges handlebar mustache and booming voice, he was a natural choice for sergeant.

The town bid farewell to the Stillwater Guard with a picnic. A minister began the festivities with a prayer, encouraging the soldiers to gird their loins. Patriotic speeches followed. The mayor spoke: "I am supremely confident our brave soldiers will be victorious in short order. God is surely on our side. Freedom for all is a noble endeavor. Freedom prevailed in 1776 when we defeated the British tyrant. In 1812, freedom prevailed again when the British tyrant sought to impose his will upon us a second time. A few short years ago, in 1848, we freed the people of the Southwest. Texas, California, and New Mexico are now free of Mexican tyranny. Our brave soldiers marched straight into Mexico City, the enemy's capital. And soon, they will march straight into the capital of the Confederacy, Montgomery, Alabama. America will easily defeat the secessionists. Freedom for all shall be the law of the land. God bless the Union. And God bless our brave soldiers."

Officers received swords and horses. Alexander's father gave him a new Enfield rifled musket and a Remington Beals five-shot .31 caliber pocket pistol. The Enfield rifle was the primary firearm of the English Army.

One hundred Stillwater Guards marched through town headed to Fort Snelling. Ladies and men wore fine clothes and lined the streets,

singing patriotic songs. Loudest of all, they sang the famous “John Brown’s Body.”

John Brown's Body lies a-mouldering in the grave,  
John Brown's Body lies a-mouldering in the grave,  
But his soul goes marching on.

Glory, glory, hallelujah,  
Glory, glory, hallelujah,  
His soul goes marching on.

He's gone to be a soldier in the Army of the Lord,  
He's gone to be a soldier in the Army of the Lord,  
His soul goes marching on.

John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,  
John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,  
His soul goes marching on.

John Brown died that the slaves might be free,  
John Brown died that the slaves might be free,  
His soul goes marching on.

The stars above in Heaven now are looking kindly down,  
The stars above in Heaven now are looking kindly down,  
His soul goes marching on.

The soldiers marched to Fort Snelling, expecting glory and easy victory.

Fort Snelling sat on a bluff overlooking the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers. For a few short days, the Minnesota



First trained at Fort Snelling. Marching or drilling comprised their training. One morning Sgt. Povich addressed them:

“Understand what I am telling you today is for your own good unless you want to die, that is. In the heat of battle, you will get confused. You can’t hear. Sometimes, you can’t see. If you wish to survive, above all remember this—Follow the flag! Protect the flag! If the flag falls, pick up what’s left of it and carry it where you’re told. Remember this, and you just might live.”

As they stood in formation, the man next to Alexander pointed his musket at Alexander’s temple. He pulled the trigger. The empty musket clicked. Dry firing the musket, pretending to shoot him in the head, lit Alexander’s fuse. He elbowed the transgressor in the side. The disturbance caught Sgt. Povich’s eye. He stated, “Order, if you lads want to dance, do so on your own time.” Alexander responded, “We shall.” There would be a fight.

Behind Alexander stood Joe Braun. He witnessed the incident. From experience, Joe knew the instigator saw Alexander as someone he could take advantage of by trick, someone the instigator could use to gain influence among his peers.

After Sgt. Povich dismissed them, Joe walked over to the instigator, Russell, and said, “Let’s do this under the oak tree at six.” And thus was the arrangement established.

Alexander was given the name ‘Alec’ by the other soldiers. As one soldier put it, “Alexander is too long a handle, and we already have an Al.” At dinner, Joe Braun sat with Alec. Other men in the unit joined and sat with them. Alec had not expected this. They talked of nothing important. At six o’clock, Braun said, “It’s time,” and they left as a group. Alec did not know how to fistfight.

Alec’s mother had often discussed that violence begets violence. She left unsaid her other concern. Violence could cause injury to her son. Alec’s father saw too much fighting at the prison. He understood a fight determined the better fighter, nothing else.

As a result, no one had ever taught Alec how to fistfight. He knew how to wrestle. So, he planned to get in close and wrestle Russell to the ground. The dispute would not end as Alec expected.

Alec and his group of five gathered under the oak tree at six. Russell and his sergeant, Eric Black, waited, talking and looking over at the group of men. Russell had a slender build, black hair, dark eyes, and pale oblong face with red cheeks. He glared at people. Braun walked over to Russell, and Black and said, "Let's start the dance." After further discussion with Russell, Black approached Braun and said, "Not tonight."

Braun replied, "Any trickery later, and there will be retribution."

"This matter is over," Black stated. "Should you become aware of any additional shenanigans, advise me of such. Private Russell will think his first name is ditch and his last name digger."

While they walked to the barracks, Sgt. Black informed Russell that the regiment always needed men to move dirt. And if he wished for a permanent position on the detail, he need simply accost Pvt. Johnson a second time. After leaving Russell at the barracks, Sgt. Black reported the outcome to Sgt. Povich. Povich told Black, "Keep an eye on Russell. He may be an evil seed."

Braun had returned to the oak tree. "It's over," he said. Alec exhaled and relaxed. Braun muttered under his breath, "Channel walkon."

"What?" asked Alec.

"Something my mother says. It means coward."

"Where is she?"

"Maison."

Alec changed the subject. "We ride the train east."

"That's a long train ride."

"Maybe we'll see Lincoln."

"Maybe the rebs will dance like Russell."

Braun laughed. They left and went to bed.



# BULL RUN

THE NEXT DAY AT SUNRISE, THE Stillwater Guard received orders to relieve career soldiers at Fort Ridgely. The career soldiers would join the Army of the Potomac in the east. Fort Ridgely was strategically located on the Minnesota River. A few miles west of the big bend in the river, it stood between the Dakota Reservations west of it and the settlements east of it. Towns such as Mankato, New Ulm, and St. Peter were east of Fort Ridgely.

The quartermaster issued smoothbore Springfield Model 1842 Muskets to the Stillwater Guard. Newer rifled Springfield Muskets were issued to soldiers joining the Army of the Potomac. The newer models had a rifled barrel, which increased range and accuracy. The rifled muskets fired the deadly .58-caliber Minié ball. Alec's rifled Enfield also fired the Minié ball.

As soon as they disembarked from the steamship at Fort Ridgely, they received new orders. Of the one hundred Stillwater Guard, twenty-five would remain at Fort Ridgely. Seventy-five would rejoin the Minnesota First on the trip east to Washington DC. Braun, Alec, and Povich were among the fortunate seventy-five. They traveled back to Fort Snelling on the same steamship. On the march from the steamship to the waiting train, Braun whispered to Alec, "I've never been on one."

When they boarded the train, Alec said, "Here, sit by the window." And they switched places. They sat with their guns between their legs

and their bedrolls on their laps. Braun looked out the window, amazed at the thirty miles per hour speed they traveled. Near Stillwater, Alec asked if they could switch seats; he wanted to see his hometown. They switched seats, and as they passed the prison, he leaned over toward the window and searched, hoping to see his father. On the bridge over the St. Croix River, Braun stood up and leaned over above Alec. Alec stood up, turned sideways, and gestured with an open hand toward the window, signaling they should switch places again. The scenery mesmerized Braun. Alec smiled as he sat down, thinking military life was enjoyable. Alec and many other soldiers in the car leaned back, slid their caps over their eyes, and catnapped. Braun stayed awake, watching the scenery.

They arrived in Chicago after dark. Sgt. Povich told them, "It's time to get accustomed to your accommodations for the next three years." They slept on the ground. A lullaby of cattle mooing, trains clanking, wagons creaking, and faint fiddle music played through the night. They woke early, ate hardtack, drank coffee, and re-boarded the train for Washington.

In Indiana, when they stopped to water the train, Sgt. Povich walked in. He looked at Braun and Alexander and said, "Up top. Take your weapon, ammo, and canteen, leave the rest, you're on sentry duty. Stay awake. Watch for an ambush. In case of an ambush, shoot and duck."

Sitting up top, Alec contemplated the expression, "duck." Did ducks duck? Coots ducked when you shot at them, but he did not recall ducks ducking. When you shot at ducks, they flew away.

Sentries sat on top of every other car. The clickity-clack was spellbinding. The train traveled through a wooded area that was cooler and shaded. It was challenging to stay alert in the wooded area. Only when they stopped for water at a jerk water town was the spell broken. After the engine drank from the spout, the whistle blew, the throttle opened, and smoke billowed out of the beast's blowhole. The

long-sectioned vertebrae of the beast's back swayed and squeaked forward. The spell was recast. After an hour, Alec noticed sentries in the front most car lowering their profile by climbing down the access stairs. Alec and Braun followed their lead. Alec saw the man two cars ahead bobbing with the motion of the train, sleeping. Over the sound of the locomotive, he heard faint yelling from the sentry behind the sleeping sentry.

Alec saw the danger ahead. A telegraph wire hung low over the tracks. Yelling did not wake the sleeping sentry. Alec fired his Enfield rifle at one of the poles holding the telegraph wire. The Minié ball struck the pole. The sentry woke up. He looked left at the pole the bullet hit and spotted the wire. He quickly extended the musket in his hand toward the hanging wire in a blocking move while bending to the right in the same motion. The musket blocked the wire. The sentry lost his grip, and the musket went flying, spinning and shattering against a tree. The sentry's block loosened the wire. It snagged the corner of a car. As the train squealed to a stop, the wire became taut, followed by a loud *bing*. The wire snapped. It fell coiled on the ground. The train slid to a halt.

"Bang, boom, bing!" exclaimed a smiling Alec.

"You missed the wire," said Braun.

Alec laughed. "I wasn't shooting at it, jester."

An officer bolted from the train, followed by armed soldiers looking for a fight.

After a moment the officer yelled, "Who shot?"

Braun yelled, "Warning shot. A sleeping sentry was about to lose his head from the telegraph wire."

"Very good," the officer replied.

Braun turned around and whispered to Alec with an enormous smile. "Veryyyy goood."

A senior officer exited a train car and scrutinized the damage. Braun and Alec watched the two officers talking and pointing first at

the pole, then at the wire, then shaking their heads up and down. They found the pantomime very entertaining, and every so often, Braun mimicked something he saw. Alec had to be careful not to laugh out loud. A local official arrived. After he inspected the damage, the train left the station.

Upon arrival in Washington, they were agape at all the activity. Union troops and equipment moved in all directions. First Minnesota received its orders to proceed thirty miles west to Centreville, Virginia. They packed up and marched west, confident they would win because of the activity, troops, wagons, and equipment they saw in Washington. All were in high spirits.

After they made camp, they built tepee-shaped fires and stayed up talking late into the night. Sometimes they heard gun shots, and they would stop talking and listen. The next morning, the sixteenth of July, they marched southwest to Manassas, Virginia.

Another day later, the First Minnesota marched to many different positions. Heat and humidity drained their strength. As they marched, soles detached from the front of some boots, remaining attached only at the heel. They referred to these as talking boots or puppet boots. At night they repaired them by sewing with a leather needle and sinew. Uniforms came apart at the seams, creating targets for the evening onslaught of mosquitoes. Around the campfire, they joked about being bled to death by mosquitos. Many said they survived their first bloody engagement, the battle of mosquito hollow.

On Sunday, they marched the scant distance from Manassas to Bull Run. As they neared Bull Run, they heard sounds of battle. Their pace increased. They arrived on the left of the Union lines. After a few minutes, the First marched quick-time, jogged, between the two opposing forces to the opposite side of the Union lines. No one shot at them. Confused by this dangerous maneuver, Braun and Alec looked at each other, searching for some insight. Alec shook his head. On the right of the Union lines, the First surrounded a Union artillery battery.

Less than a hundred feet in front of them stood a line of troops in blue. Alec stared at them. The troops facing them raised a blue flag with a single white star in the middle. A Union soldier yelled, "Damn, it's the Bonnie Blue Flag."

"So what," came the reply.

"That's a rebel flag over there," yelled the unmistakable voice of Sgt. Povich.

Word spread down the union line. Union soldiers dropped blanket wraps off their shoulders. The First Minnesota raised the Union flag. Shooting commenced, reluctantly at first, then everyone fired across both lines. Puffs of black smoke rose above them, like the smoke around groups of boys lighting firecrackers at the village park on the Fourth of July. Bullets buzzed above their heads, thudded into the ground with puffs of dirt, and cracked into the trees. Incoming fire increased from many different directions. Chaos ensued. Union men started running toward Washington. Union soldiers fell, stumbled, landed on one another, left equipment, some dropping their muskets.

Union soldiers died, shot in the back. Some stepped into holes in the ground. Alec saw one man's leg sink up to his hip. Without pause, he bounced up in a full run. Alec saw many others fall face down and arise running in the same smooth motion. More soldiers dropped rifles on the ground, turned, and ran full speed toward Washington.

Alec's head was on a swivel. He looked for a target. But bullets came in from every direction. He could not focus on a single direction in which to shoot. The confusion of not knowing where the bullets came from caused him to panic. Then he heard Povich. "Run, and I'll shoot you in the back; they'll give me a medal for it." And, "Your back makes a better, bigger target for the rebs."

Near him Braun pointed and directed and ordered men.

"Behind the stump," to one.

"Duck down when you reload," to another.

"You three get behind the fence."

The First Minnesota did not run. Following the regimental flag, the First Minnesota withdrew from the battle. They shot, reloaded, and moved back. Arms dangled from red mauled flesh, limp like a rag doll's arm. Fewer Union soldiers returned fire. Alec heard praying and moaning. Waves of gunfire poured in from the Confederate line. The ground shook from the Confederate artillery. Tree tops exploded. Through the smoke, Alec saw head wounds and arm wounds. Off to his right, he saw the regimental flag. The Confederates shot the spearhead off. Their musket fire had chewed up the staff. The flag had a big hole from a cannon shot and many smaller holes from musket balls. Those protecting the flag, the color guard, were bloody. One color guardsman fell, never to rise again. Someone else picked up and carried the flag, leading the First on its withdrawal from the field of fire.

From the right came the rebel yell from their cavalry. And farther off to the right side on a knoll, ladies from Washington dressed in their finery watched in horror. Alec saw the ladies, laid his gun down, and turned around. Alec felt Braun's hand on his shoulder, and their eyes met. Something in Braun's eyes gave Alec the courage to keep fighting. He picked up his Enfield and reloaded. And off to their right, the Firemen Zouaves of New York, in their bright red shirts and blue pants, repelled the gray cavalry. The Confederate cavalry withdrew, leaving the field littered with silent red shirts.

The First retreated from the battlefield. They joined the multitude on the road to Washington. People, horses, carts, and soldiers crowded the road. The mixed multitude crawled east toward Washington. The panicked civilian picnickers from Washington intermingled with the soldiers on the road. Abandoned buggies and carriages littered the side of the road. Everyone pushed forward.

Those on the road watched over their shoulders for the attacking rebels, fearful they would appear in mass on the horizon. At a crossroads, civilian Washington observers attempted to enter the major road to Washington. People jockeyed for position, one man



offering twenty dollars for the right of way, to no avail. He gave up and jumped off his carriage and rode his draft horse. Others pushed the carriage off the road.

People looked behind them. If the rebels appeared, soldiers, picnickers, and animals would stampede. The jumping, whinnying, bolting, and jibbing horses and hot, sweaty soldiers and frightened civilians continued their slow and tumultuous return to Washington.

When they reached Washington, the First helped prepare for the Confederate attack. They barricaded streets with wagons, barrels, and furniture.

The Confederates never came. There would be no attack on Washington.

The losses at Bull Run left vacancies in the ranks. Because of his bravery at Bull Run, Braun was promoted to sergeant by Capt. Bradley. Sgt. Braun requested Alec serve under him as a corporal. Bradley granted his request.

The First received new orders to proceed west to Maryland. Across the Potomac from them was Virginia and the Confederates.

Two weeks after Bull Run, Alec received a letter from his mother:

*Dear Son,*

*I hope you are well. With great trepidation, I have been reading accounts of Bull Run. We sustained over eighty killed or missing soldiers and over one hundred wounded. This dramatic news saddens many households. Friends and neighbors are searching for any news about the missing. Please correspond post-haste should you have any information about John Olsen, Pierre Dumont, or Ferdinand MacMillan. They are missing.*

*Also disturbing are the reports of retreat, although we are all pleased the first was one of the last to withdraw from the battlefield. The president requested 500,000 more men.*

*In other news, your father is now a Mark Master Mason, whatever that is he won't disclose. On the occasion of his installment, if that is the word, he returned smelling of spirits. Whether from the meeting or saloon, I know not. I have learned not to ask. Some night perhaps I will hide in a Mason closet. I wonder what the punishment would be for that grievous impropriety. Maybe I would be forced to stand outside the lodge with a sign around my neck, "Intermeddler."*

*Love,*

*Mother and Father In absentia (Mason Meeting)*

Alec worked on the labor detail building barricades and digging ditches. One day he heard Capt. Bradley needed men who could write.

Alec found Sgt. Povich and volunteered as a writer. The captain, Alec was told, had a plan to reduce the monotony of camp life and wanted to publish a newspaper.

The paper contained humorous and patriotic articles. Most of the stories contained propaganda. One recurring story was that after Bull Run, the rebels were too scared to follow them to Washington. This was a popular story, and the saying around camp was, "Chicken secesh, scared to come after us." The most popular story was Alec's "Jenny the Mule."

Jenny the Mule

By Alec Johnson

Jenny's father, Jack, was a donkey from far-away Palestine. Jack was in the direct line of descendants from the colt Christ rode into Jerusalem. He was a Christian donkey. At a young age, Jack embarked on an ocean voyage to America to escape the religious intolerance of his

homeland so he could worship freely in America. He was a romantic lad, as we shall find out later in our tale. Jack enlisted in our noble cause at the first call.

We freed Jenny's mother from bondage during a raid into Virginia to gather livestock for our noble cause. Her mother was a beautiful mare giddy to escape Virginia. She was corralled next to Jack, who was smitten by her beauty. After a brief engagement at the urging and encouragement of the quartermaster, they wed in holy matrimony. The first of many children, Jenny, was born. Jenny loved freedom. They educated her at the Mule School. At Mule School, she was melancholy to learn she would bear no offspring. We shall learn later this was true for more than one reason.

At the battle of Manassas, as we were returning to defend Washington, a reb came behind her. Her driver yelled, "Secesh, Jenny," and Jenny kicked the poor lad with both legs back to Virginia. To which the woozy reb laying on his back looking up at Jenny's behind remarked, "Y'all ain't no farm hands, that's a dam John mule." Jenny or John makes no never mind as the rebs will be kicked back to Virginia if they ever cross the Potomac.

The soldiers overheard the officers talking about Bull Run. Word spread around camp in bits and pieces via the "camp telegraph." The rebels used trains to bring reinforcements from the West. Why the rebels did not follow the Union retreat remained uncertain. According to the camp telegraph, the Confederate soldiers were as green as the Union soldiers. The men came to believe the trains, not the rebels, defeated them.

Alec returned his mother's correspondence:

*Dear Mother,*

*I have some pleasant news and some unpleasant news. The unpleasant news is Frederick MacMillan is missing. Amid the conflagration, I saw him clutching his leg, delirious from an artillery round. The consensus is he may be a prisoner. I suggest friends and family write to the War Department. Pierre Dumont is likely with his Maker. He disappeared never to be seen again with the same artillery blast that injured Frederick.*

*John Olsen is well. He assures me he has written home. He got lost for a bit, joining up with the New York Firemen Zouaves. You know he is a volunteer fireman. He was in no hurry to return. He claims the New Yorkers are an entertaining lot.*

*I write for the regimental newspaper. Enclosed is my article about Jenny. I hope you enjoy it.*

*Love,*

*Alexander*