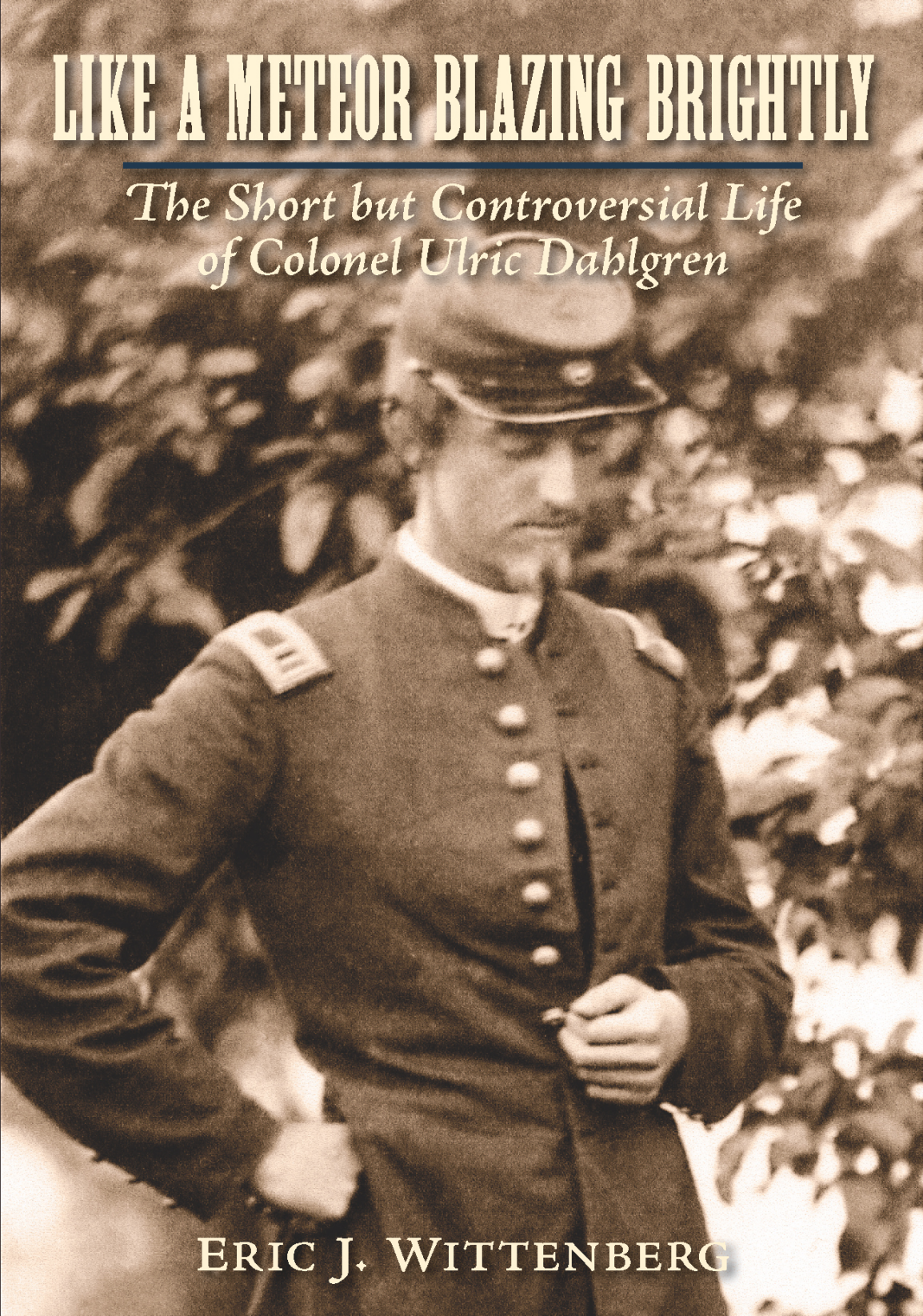
LIKE A METEOR BLAZING BRIGHTLY

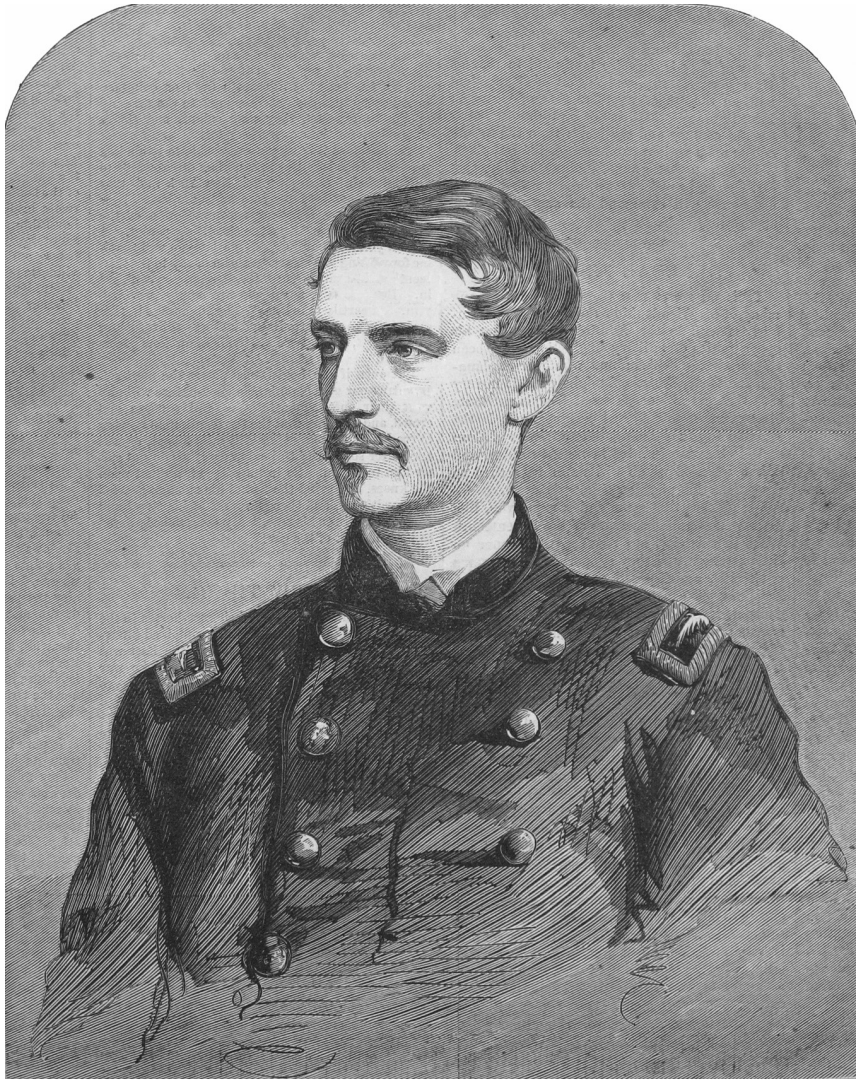
The Short but Controversial Life of Colonel Ulric Dahlgren



ERIC J. WITTENBERG

Like a Meteor Blazing Brightly

The Short but Controversial Life of Colonel Ulric Dahlgren



Colonel Ulric Dahlgren
HARPER'S WEEKLY

Like a Meteor Blazing Brightly

The Short but Controversial Life of Colonel Ulric Dahlgren

Eric J. Wittenberg

SB
Savas Beatie
California

Like a Meteor Burning Brightly: The Short but Controversial Life of Colonel Ulric Dahlgren,
by Eric J. Wittenberg

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

05 04 03 02 01 5 4 3 2 1
First Savas Beatie print edition, first printing
ISBN: 978-1-61121-280-8

Digital edition by Savas Publishing Company
ISBN: 978-1-94066-959-5

SB

Published by
Savas Beatie LLC
989 Governor Drive, Suite 102
El Dorado Hills, CA 95762

Phone: 916-941-6896
(E-mail) sales@savasbeatie.com

Savas Beatie titles are available at special discounts for bulk purchases in the United States by corporations, institutions, and other organizations. For more details, please contact Special Sales, P.O. Box 4527, El Dorado Hills, CA 95762, or you may e-mail us at sales@savasbeatie.com, or visit our website at www.savasbeatie.com for additional information.

Contents

Maps

This book is respectfully dedicated to the memory of every American cavalryman who has answered the call, "Boots and saddles." It is also dedicated to the memory of Ulric Dahlgren, who died defending a cause he believed in most fervently.

Foreword

"Ulric Dahlgren was born to be a soldier," writes Eric Wittenberg, and in this first-ever biography of the young Yankee colonel he makes a very convincing case. An expert artillerist, a bold cavalryman, a recklessly daring scout—Dahlgren played all of these roles, and more, in his brief, incandescent Civil War career. His final role, in the notorious Kilpatrick-Dahlgren raid on Richmond in 1864, has until now defined him in history's judgment. By unearthing new sources and re-examining old ones, biographer Wittenberg offers a new and clearer definition of this complex character.

Even though Dahlgren was killed in action just short of his twenty-second birthday, he left an invaluable paper trail—letters and diaries and other documents—that unlock mysteries of his short and violent military career. Here for the first time, too, is an in-depth examination of his formative years. The dominant figure in this all-too-brief life was his father, Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren, a close friend of President Lincoln's and a man whose own ambitions fed Ulric's soldierly ambitions. Of equal importance, there is much newly discovered source material here to clarify and give a defining focus to the Kilpatrick-Dahlgren raid.

Ulric Dahlgren could not wait to go to war, and once in it, could not wait for the next mission, the next battle, the next test. A reviewer of John Hersey's powerful World War II novel *The War Lover* described it as "A subtle demonstration of what lies coiled on the floor of the minds of those who really like war." That could as easily describe young Colonel Dahlgren. He was a type, of course; others of the sort that come to mind are J.E.B. Stuart and George Armstrong Custer. War lovers all, and, incidentally, all cavalrymen. What lay coiled on the floor of the mind of Ulric Dahlgren as he rode off toward Richmond on February 28, 1864, can be glimpsed in *Like a Meteor Blazing Brightly*.

Stephen W. Sears
Norwalk, Connecticut

Muss at Camp

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Author's Preface

For most of my adult life, I have studied the exploits of Civil War cavalrymen. Every once in a while, a fascinating character flashes across the heavens like a brightly blazing meteor and then fades away just as quickly, triggering my keen interest and causing me to speculate about what might have been. One such character is Col. Ulric Dahlgren. Although he had absolutely no formal military training, he served as the chief of artillery for an entire corps of infantry at the tender age of twenty. A full colonel at twenty-one and dead in combat before he turned twenty-two, Dahlgren's life was an unfinished work. At once brilliant, reckless, daring, scheming, boundlessly ambitious, heroic, and inspirational, this young man clearly had what author Tom Wolfe has called "the right stuff." Dahlgren might have achieved greatness as a cavalryman had he lived.

What makes his death in March 1864 all the more interesting is that it was shrouded in mystery and controversy, and the truth of it probably will never be known. The mysterious circumstances of his death have overshadowed his many contributions to the Union victory in the Civil War. Because of the pall cast over his untimely demise, history has largely forgotten Ulric Dahlgren. If he is remembered at all, it is either as a villain, or as a footnote to a failed cavalry raid that bears his name. Completely forgotten are his many daring exploits as a scout and his fine work as an artillerist.

He was born into a life of privilege, the favored son of a brilliant naval officer who became a very close friend and confidant of the President of the United States. No other twenty-one-year-old Army captain enjoyed more or better access to President Abraham Lincoln as did Ully Dahlgren, and perhaps no other twenty-one-year-old unrelated junior officer in history has enjoyed such unfettered access to the Chief Executive than did Dahlgren. He became the youngest full colonel in either army and demonstrated real courage and ability on the field of battle. He parlayed that access to Lincoln's administration into a daring scheme that has forever tainted his name and legacy with unsavory controversy. Sadly, that unsavory controversy means that his good traits—courage, inspirational leadership, prodigious talent for artillery tactics, and a real gift for leading scouting expeditions—have been largely overlooked. Likewise

overlooked is the important role he played during the Battle of Gettysburg and during the forgotten Second Bull Run Campaign.

I hope I have painted an accurate portrait of this fascinating young man by placing him squarely in the context of his times. I show how he used his father's political connections to achieve inordinately high rank at a precocious age, and how the pursuit of his unbridled ambition ultimately cost him his life. By contrast, I demonstrate that he was a brilliant young man, possessed of a keen mind, a charming, charismatic personality, with boundless courage, and the ability to inspire and lead men in battle. I explore the controversy surrounding his death, and conclude by analyzing the young man's legacy and assessing him as a soldier. An appendix addresses the question of the validity of the so-called "Dahlgren Papers."

All interpretations and conclusions set forth herein are strictly my own, and I take full responsibility for them as such.

As with every project of this nature, there are many people to thank. First and foremost, I owe a debt of gratitude to Prof. Herschel Gower, of Dallas, Texas, who has spent years studying the Dahlgren clan. Professor Gower kindly shared the fruits of his labor, enabling me to put much more meat on the bones of this project. Likewise, Bryce A. Suderow of Washington, D. C., and Steve L. Zerbe of Cherry Hill, New Jersey, my trusted research assistants, uncovered a great deal of useful primary source information for me that helped to round out this story. Ted Alexander, the National Park Service historian at Antietam, who is a life-long resident of Greencastle, Pennsylvania (where Ully Dahlgren made his greatest contributions to the Union victory in the Civil War), showed me important sites related to Dahlgren, and shared his encyclopedic knowledge of the Civil War in Franklin County. The eminent Civil War historian Stephen W. Sears read my manuscript, gave me some extremely useful feedback that made this a better book, and wrote the excellent foreword. I am indebted to Steve for his guidance and his willingness to help.

Paula Gidjunis made a special trip to try to locate Admiral Dahlgren's former home in Warwick Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania for me (sadly, it's been demolished). Lawrence Clemens, a librarian at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, provided invaluable assistance in tracking down information on the elusive Acting Master Charles H. Daniels. Jennifer Goellnitz of Cleveland, Ohio was very helpful in tracking down manuscript materials by Maj. Gen. Franz Sigel at the Western Reserve Historical Society, as well as an extremely hard-to-find volume of the proceedings of Philadelphia's

Franklin Institute from 1861. Thanks to Jenny's help, two large holes in the narrative were plugged.

J. David Petruzzi, of Brockway, Pennsylvania, provided me with data on life in Washington, D. C. in the 1850s, and also read and commented on this manuscript, as did Michael F. Nugent of Wells, Maine, Robert F. O'Neill, Jr. of Eureka, Montana, and Horace Mewborn of New Bern, North Carolina. Horace also suggested that I turn my fascination with Ulric Dahlgren into a book-length treatment, and Bob O'Neill provided useful information on Dahlgren's role in November 1862. Tonia J. Smith, of Pinehurst, North Carolina, assisted with the research and read this manuscript for me. Rob Wick provided me with very useful information about Everton J. Conger, and told me where I could find a war-time photograph of Conger. Col. Peter G. Tsouras (Ret.) provided useful information on the connection between Ulric Dahlgren and the Bureau of Military Information and caught a couple of factual errors I made. Scott C. Patchan gave his time to review this manuscript for me, and I value his expertise on the Second Bull Run Campaign of 1862. My friend and mentor, the late Brian C. Pohanka, inspired me to write this book and to uncover the true story of Ulric Dahlgren's life. Like Dahlgren himself, Brian was cut down too soon, and I miss his steady hand and sound advice.

I would be remiss if I did not thank my wonderful, loving and infinitely patient wife, Susan Skilken Wittenberg, for her endless support and unfailing understanding of my need to tell the stories of Civil War cavalrymen. I could not accomplish the things that I do without her help and support.

Eric J. Wittenberg
Columbus, Ohio

LIKE A METEOR BLAZING BRIGHTLY

The Short but Controversial Life of Colonel Ulric Dahlgren

"Studying the Art of War": Dahlgren with fellow officers. Photograph by Alexander Gardner

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Introduction

Darkness came early during the first days of March 1864 in Virginia. As it did every year, spring struggled to shove winter out of the way, but at the beginning of the month, winter still regularly won the ongoing battle. Even though it was still winter, a large force of Union cavalry departed the Army of the Potomac's comfortable encampment in Culpeper County, Virginia on February 28, headed straight for the Confederate capital of Richmond. A dashing, one-legged twenty-one-year-old colonel commanded one portion of the raid column, leading 500 veteran troopers. It was cold. So cold, it crept into the marrow of the blue clad horse soldiers. And wet. So frigidly soggy, in fact, that their bodies had all but forgotten the sun and forgotten the warmth of the roaring campfires they left behind as they headed south across the Virginia countryside.

On March 2, the colonel and his men reached the outskirts of Richmond and, after clashing with Confederate troops, were repulsed from the capital's outer ring of defenses with fairly heavy losses. Along with about 100 men of his command, the one-legged Union colonel was cut off from his main body and then fell back into King and Queen County. Shortly before midnight, the colonel unexpectedly encountered enemy resistance. He rode forward and challenged the men in his front, drawing his pistol and demanding their surrender. However, a volley dropped him from the saddle. His body riddled with bullets, the handsome young colonel toppled onto the road, killed instantly. The rest of his command scattered, leaving his body behind. They were either captured or surrendered the next day.

Later that night, a thirteen-year-old local boy named William Littlepage came forward to examine the body. After searching the colonel's pockets, he found some documents hidden inside a cigar case in the colonel's inside breast pocket. These documents included dispatches that looked like they might provide important military intelligence, and several specific documents that would be of interest to the highest levels of the Confederate government. Littlepage gave them to his teacher, a man named Edward W. Halbach, who read them carefully. Realizing that these documents needed to get into the hands of the authorities, the next afternoon, Halbach sought out Lt. James Pollard of the 9th Virginia Cavalry, commander of the detachment that had helped set the ambush for the Union cavalrymen.

Until that moment, Pollard had known nothing of these documents. Halbach

told the lieutenant the nature of their contents, and then, at Pollard's request, permitted him to read the papers. Stunned by what he read, Pollard asked for permission to take them to the Confederate authorities in Richmond. At first Halbach refused, thinking that simply mailing them to Richmond would suffice. However, Halbach's friends prevailed upon him to surrender the papers to Lieutenant Pollard since they would reach Richmond much more quickly through his efforts than through a semi-weekly mail. Halbach consented, and Pollard took them directly to the Confederate authorities, who were appalled by the contents of the documents.

The documents suggested that a primary purpose of the Union cavalry raid was the kidnapping and assassination of Confederate President Jefferson Davis and his cabinet, as well as the ransacking and burning of most of Richmond. The Confederate authorities were understandably shocked by documents that appeared to be orders to the Federal horse soldiers to engage in atrocities. Such things were unknown in the early months of 1864, and the suggestion that the Federal government had sanctioned such conduct raised a hue and cry at every level of Confederate society. Within days, the Richmond newspapers published the contents of the documents verbatim, and an outraged public responded so virulently that the Confederate authorities ordered that the dead Union colonel be buried in an unmarked grave in a Richmond cemetery late at night in order to avoid its mutilation.

That Col. Ulric Dahlgren, son of Admiral John A. Dahlgren, commander of the Union naval forces investing Charleston, South Carolina, and a close confidant and advisor of Abraham Lincoln, was the officer carrying these documents made it all the more incredible. He was considered to be an officer of great promise and of great ability, and nobody expected such a horrific thing from him.

That Ulric Dahlgren was killed in an ambush is beyond dispute. However, that is about all about this episode that is not deeply immersed in controversy. In the months after his son's death, Admiral Dahlgren penned a letter vehemently denying that the documents were authentic. The documents may have been forgeries. Or they may have been real. No matter whether they were forgeries or were authentic, the United States government officially disavowed Ulric Dahlgren and triggered a controversy that still rages today among students and scholars of the Civil War.

How did this handsome, charismatic, brilliant, and fearless young man, who had such a bright future, end up as a villain—an outlaw disavowed by his own army and government? This is the story of Ulric Dahlgren's short but controversial life.

John Dahlgren
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

CHAPTER ONE

A Boy's Proud Family Legacy

The Dahlgren family's ancient roots stretch back to Sweden. The paterfamilias of the family was Borje Ericsson, or Ersson, who was born in Dahlen, Sweden in 1593. In 1615, he assumed the name Dahlgren, which was derived from the name of, Dahlen, the ward of the town Norrköping, where he lived, and grén, which means "branch" or "bough," suggesting that he was an offshoot or branch of his hometown. Consequently, the name "Eric" appears frequently in the extended Dahlgren family genealogy.[1]

The Dahlgren family has a long history of devoted and distinguished public service, accruing great wealth and enjoying the favor of the Swedish Crown. Several members also dedicated their lives to the advancement of medicine and science. Many of them served in the military, loyally sacrificing wealth and stature for the common good. "His paternal ancestry stretching back through a long, honorable and cultured lineage of Sweden, gave to him a noble blood and high examples of the virtues which he reviewed and emulated as a true and favored son of that great Scandinavian race, which has so long stamped its resistless impress on the historic fortunes of Europe," observed Ulric Dahlgren's eulogist in 1864.[2] Ully proudly carried on his family's name and military tradition.

Johan Adolf Dahlgren was the son of Bernard Ebbe Dahlgren and Anna M. Neuhauser. Born in 1744 in Norrköping, a town on the Baltic coast to the southwest of Stockholm, he was educated by private tutors and then studied chemistry and pharmacy with the Admiralty chemist in Stockholm. He enrolled at the University of Uppsala on November 2, 1764, became a protégé of the famous naturalist Carolus Linnaeus, and graduated as a medical doctor in 1775. This extended course of study prepared him for the rigors of medicine, and the faculty soon held Doctor Dahlgren in great esteem. On October 14, 1789, Dahlgren was appointed Chief Physician and Assessor of the Province of Finland, where he lived out the rest of his life. Johan Adolph married Maria Rådde, the daughter of a fabric dyer Stockholm.[3] He died on May 14, 1797 at the relatively young age of fifty-three, "much respected by the authorities, and beloved by the poor, who in a large body followed his remains to the grave,—a civic funeral having decreed him by the town Uleåborg, where he had resided."[4]

His son Carl Adolph followed him into the field of medicine. Carl Adolph

was appointed as a sub-physician in the Royal Navy in 1797 and served for three years. With the coming of war in 1808, he offered his services to the Crown and assumed a position as staff surgeon in the Finnish army, where he served out the war. He then re-entered the Navy, and was appointed Court Physician in 1809. In 1813, he was named Field Surgeon to the army operating in Norway. In 1838, he became Field Surgeon in Chief to the Elfsborg Regiment and was given an order by the King of Sweden, probably the Order of the Sword (Svärdsorden) in recognition of his long years of service. Sir Carl Adolph died in Stockholm in 1844.[5]

Carl Adolph's son Johan Adolph was born in 1813, and represents the last member of the Dahlgren family to achieve prominence in their native Sweden. Sir Johan Adolph authored various treatises on chemistry and medicinal botany, and was also an inventor and chemist. In 1871, his health poor, Sir Johan Adolph resigned the Directorship of the Royal Military Hospital in Stockholm, and enjoyed a quiet retirement. He died at sixty-three on June 7, 1876.[6]

Bernhard Ulrick Dahlgren, the father of Admiral John A. Dahlgren, was born on May 12, 1784, and was a son of the first Johan Adolph Dahlgren. He stood more than six feet, four inches tall, and possessed majestic Nordic proportions and features. He graduated from Uppsala and became an adventurous traveler at an early age, making frequent expeditions to various locations around the globe. However, unlike his father, Bernhard did not loyally serve the Swedish monarchy. In 1804, he was caught passing out literature that advocated republican principles, an act akin to treason against the Crown. As a result, he fled Sweden, and King Gustavus confiscated his property. After a lengthy and hazardous journey of nearly three years, he sold his guns and most of his possessions to raise $80.00 for passage. He embarked for New York from Spain, landing there on December 4, 1806, after "a boisterous passage." Although fluent in Swedish and French, Bernhard knew little English and took any menial job that he could find in order to survive. He promptly applied for naturalization and soon became a U. S. citizen.[7]

In 1807, he went to Haiti as a cashier for Thomas Lewis and Co. at a salary of $800 per year, but the Swede never grew accustomed to the heat and humidity of the Caribbean. He returned to the United States, settling in Philadelphia this time. The City of Brotherly Love was a logical choice for Bernhard. Swedish settlers had arrived in Pennsylvania as early as 1638, well before the earliest English settlers arrived. These sturdy Swedes established a settlement on the site of present-day Philadelphia called Wicaco. The eastern part of what we know today as Pennsylvania, most of New Jersey, and all of Delaware were

part of a region commonly known as New Sweden.[8] Although the Dutch who governed New York eventually conquered New Sweden in 1654, the area continued to draw Swedish and Finnish immigrants.[9] The oldest church in Philadelphia, called Gloria Dei Church, is known as Old Swedes' Church, and was a major hub of Swedish culture in North America. Its pastor, Rev. Nicholas Collin, was a noted Swedish scientist and student of medicine as well as a noted theologian, and he would have been acquainted with Johann Adolph Dahlgren's scientific work in Sweden.[10] Also, Philadelphia's status as a major trading port drew Dahlgren's attention.

Despite being a U. S. citizen, Bernhard Dahlgren remained loyal to the Swedish Crown even though he had lost all of his worldly possessions to it. "My father refused to desert his King Gustavus to the interest of Napoleon, who placed Bernadotte on the throne, and was driven from Sweden and his property seized," inaccurately recalled Bernhard's son Charles, "but afterward triumphed in the return of his possessions when Sweden became hostile to Napoleon." As a reward for his fealty to his country, Bernhard received clemency from the Swedish Crown, and an appointment as Swedish and Norwegian Consul at Philadelphia, a position that he held until his death in 1824.[11]

Bernhard was a skilled and successful merchant and a man of integrity. He engaged in the lucrative slave trade, owned part of a banking company, and speculated in real estate. When the state capital was moved from Philadelphia to Harrisburg, Bernhard signed a petition for permission to build a bridge across the wide Susquehanna River, looking to capitalize on the increased traffic that would inevitably result from the establishment of the state capital on the banks of the river.[12]

A prominent New York lawyer named Daniel Lord once described Bernhard as "The Man of Ross," alluding to his reputation for strict probity, and noted that he regularly decided disputed matters in order to avoid litigation. "So great was the confidence reposed in his impartial and clear judgment, that his arbitration was accepted as conclusive," observed Admiral Dahlgren's second wife Madeleine in 1882. He conducted himself by the motto "Candor and Fidelity," and earned the respect of the community.[13] Fellow Philadelphians considered him "a man of strong mind," "highly respectable," and "unquestionably one of our most respectable and worthy citizens." Bernhard, possessed of strong republican sentiments, actively participated in Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party, became a respected officer in Philadelphia's influential Masonic organizations, and enjoyed the theater.[14]

Bernhard married twenty-two-year-old Martha Rowan, daughter of James

Rowan, on November 19, 1808. Like Bernhard, James Rowan lost his estate in Ireland as punishment for his republican activities, and settled in Philadelphia. During the Revolutionary War, Rowan took up arms and served as assistant commissary to General James Lacey's brigade of the Pennsylvania Line. He fought in the battles of Brandywine, Germantown, and Princeton.[15] He "lived to see his principles triumph at the peace of 1783," recalled his grandson Charles Dahlgren.[16] Rowan was a lineal descendant of an influential northern Irish family, and claimed collateral lineage of the De Rohan family of Brittany.[17] He married Jane McConnell and had several children, including Martha. Rowan had advanced his own funds to pay for supplies for the army, and either was never reimbursed for those advances, or was paid in worthless Continental money, leaving him largely destitute. However, he was a strong patriot and a walking paradox—Rowan was a member of the Society of Friends, also known as the Quakers, a pacifist sect that did not participate in war. He was excommunicated from the Society for taking up arms in the Revolutionary War. James Rowan was also a respected soldier, and he passed his military bearing, strong sense of duty, and patriotism on to his daughter and grandsons.[18]

Martha Rowan Dahlgren was "a lady richly endowed with the best qualities of head and heart, the memory of which has remained with her son during a long and varied career," fondly remembered her oldest son, Admiral Dahlgren, in 1868. She had a special talent for inventiveness and designing, a trait that she passed on to her son John.[19] The family settled in a comfortable house at the corner of Walnut and Third Streets in Center City Philadelphia. Their first child, John Adolphus Dahlgren, was born on November 13, 1809. Charles Gustavus Ulric followed in 1811, as did George Washington, who died in infancy; Martha Matilde, who was known to her family as Patty, arrived in 1818; and William Theodore was born in 1820. William Theodore later shunned the Dahlgren name and heritage and instead assumed the moniker William de Rohan. By all accounts, it was a happy household.

Respecting his family's rich educational tradition, Bernhard laid out a rigorous course of study for his sons, which included Latin, Spanish, and mathematics. He spared no expense in the education of his boys, and occasionally attended school with them in order to make certain that they received the sort of academic challenge he desired. John later described his youth as being spent as "a hard student" under his father's watchful gaze.[20]

However, Bernhard's sudden death at the age of forty on July 19, 1824 shattered the family's happiness. His friend Dr. Collin officiated over his funeral, and he was buried in the Gloria Dei Church cemetery in downtown Philadelphia.[21]

Martha followed him there fourteen years later. Bernhard's unexpected death left John Dahlgren the head of the household at the tender age of 15.[22] "Had [Bernhard] lived a few years longer [he] would have left his family in excellent circumstances had his talents and industry continued to yield what was in the receipt of at the time he died," said a family friend. "As it is the children must as early as possible free themselves from dependence on the Mother."[23]

John received a good education at the nearby Quaker schoolhouse, and possessed a gift for languages and mathematics. Always interested in ships and sailing, and fascinated by the naval vessels being built and repaired at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, he often visited there. However, Bernhard's passing left the family in poor financial condition, and to continue his education, John had to find a way to pay for it. He soon found the means—pursuing his lifelong interest in ships and the sea, he looked to join the United States Navy.

In 1825, at the age of sixteen, John applied for a midshipman's warrant but was rejected because there were already too many young men from Philadelphia in the service.[24] Undaunted, John registered as a seaman on a merchant brig, and continued his campaign for a warrant. Finally, on February 1, 1826, Secretary of the Navy Samuel L. Southard appointed him a midshipman in the United States Navy, beginning a long and successful career that brought him fame and glory.[25]

He served as a midshipman and learned the sailor's trade the hard way, on the job. Passing his midshipman's examination in 1832, he joined the United States Coast Survey two years later. The Navy's archaic system for promotions prevented him from advancing his career in any meaningful fashion until he finally received a promotion to lieutenant on March 8, 1836, ten years after joining the service. Dahlgren vented his frustration—and jeopardized his career—by publishing a series of articles critical of the Navy under the pseudonym "Blue Jacket." Had the true identity of the writer been determined, Dahlgren's Naval career undoubtedly would have ended ignominiously. Fortunately, the Naval hierarchy never learned the true identity of "Blue Jacket", and Dahlgren's career continued to lurch forward in fits and starts.[26]

John Dahlgren remained very proud of his Swedish heritage. On April 1, 1844, while on a cruise through Europe, he visited a Swedish warship in Toulon harbor in France. "As I stood on the deck and gazed on the Northern race around me, fair as women, stalwart seamen as they were, it was not forgotten that these were the countrymen of my good father," he wrote in his diary. "Amid all the thoughts that crossed his mind, could he ever have imagined that his son would some day stand in the relation of a foreign officer to Swedish

men? I asked an officer who stood near me if he had ever met with any of my name. His eyes glistened and his face lit up at the very mention. 'Oh, yes,' said he, 'it is a real Swedish name.'"[27] Partly as a result of his strong pride in his heritage, Dahlgren gave his third child the traditional Swedish name Ulric. He also made certain that his sons knew well their illustrious Swedish heritage.

When thrust into the role of family leader upon Bernhard's death in 1824, John Dahlgren developed a strong sense of self-discipline and rigorous principles to implement that strong sense of self-discipline. Those rigorous principles led him to engage in at least one duel, and almost triggered another during a European cruise from 1843-1845. "What indeed can be so degraded as a man without courage," he wrote in 1845, "unless it be a woman without virtue."[28]

An eye injury incurred in the line of duty that nearly cost him his sight kept him from seagoing duty for several years. However, because of the nature of the wound, he collected his full salary while recuperating. He purchased an 86.5-acre farm "with a comfortable dwelling-house upon it" near Hartsville, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, not far from the banks of tranquil Neshaminy Creek, where he clearly savored being a gentleman farmer.[29] Hartsville was a pleasant community settled near the beginning of the eighteenth century that served as George Washington's headquarters during the Revolutionary War.[30] Dahlgren's handsome 1790 farmhouse had three bedrooms. It sat half a mile east of Hartsville on the old Bristol Road, and was a "substantial but unpretentious plastered stone house."[31]

While recuperating from his optical problems, John Dahlgren married his sweetheart, Mary Clement Bunker, on January 8, 1839. Born in 1817, Mary was eight years younger than John. She was "beautiful in person—lovely in disposition and noble in character," as her sister-in-law Patty Dahlgren Read recalled. "All who ever met her not only admired but loved her, and her dear children were as dear to me as they could have been if they had been my own."[32] In 1855, Dahlgren described his wife in loving terms:

> One does not often meet with a person as intelligent, refined, and accustomed to intercourse with people of the highest social position, yet so perfectly natural and unsophisticated. Her bright, joyous soul associated itself instantly with poor or rich, high and low, and sympathized freely with every sorrow. Most unselfish, she gave freely of all she had, and retained so little for her own use, that she seemed to possess nothing more, absolutely, than just what the moment required. All the finery and trinkets in her drawers would not have satisfied the merest girl. The little jewelry she had, was

> made of two or three memorials of her parents or my own . . . Her figure was rather tall, her face beautiful, and the dress, whatever it was, seemed to be just what it should be. Her raven tresses and brilliant black eyes more than equaled any ornament she could wear. In company, her manner was fascinating to a charm, and she commanded the attention of those who did not know her, and the affectionate greetings of those who did; for to the least glance was evident the most lovely creature,—one kind, elegant, and as unsuspicious of harm as an infant.[33]

John also fondly recalled, "She was one who, to every charm of rare beauty and a lovely presence, added the attractive graces of refined social life, and a Christian piety that never failed to win the admiration of her friends and the affectionate attachment of her family."[34]

Fortunately for John Dahlgren, Mary also came from a good family. Her father, Nathan Bunker, was a prominent Philadelphia merchant who enjoyed power, influence and connections that could only help his new son-in-law's career. Mary's two sisters both married well, to wealthy merchants, James W. Paul of Philadelphia and S. Abbott Lawrence of Boston.[35] Knowing the importance and benefits of having friends in high places, Dahlgren did not hesitate to take advantage of these connections in his quest to advance his career.

Although John's naval duty often took him away from Mary once his eyes were well enough to permit him to return to sea in 1842, they had a happy marriage. "Three months have elapsed since I left you, and they have weighed on me like years," he wrote while away on duty. "All my pleasure has been centered in one, and now that I am exiled from this, how different does all else seem to me."[36]

In the meantime, John happily worked his farm while waiting for his vision to improve, and watched his family grow. His first child, Charles Bunker Dahlgren, was born on the farm in 1839, and was followed by Elizabeth in 1840.[37] Their third child, Ulric, was born on April 3, 1842, and was baptized by Rev. J. P. Wilson, the Presbyterian minister who later presided over the boy's funeral.[38] "His very name was a presage of his character, derived as it was from the mighty Alaric, king of the Visigoths, and conqueror of Rome," observed Ulric Dahlgren's eulogist in 1864.[39] Two other children, Elizabeth and Lawrence, both died in infancy; John never even saw Elizabeth, who was born and died while he was at sea. "My child—my child—what have I done that you should be taken from me thus," he mourned in a letter to Mary. "Have not afflictions sufficient enough been heaped on me already but that death must strike down one of my little flock—and make desolate a stricken heart—Spare them, oh

spare them, they are the treasure of a lone & sorrowful soul—in mercy let me be called first."[40] The birth of another daughter named Eva and a son named Paul in 1846 somewhat assuaged Dahlgren's grief.

John Dahlgren loved his children deeply, and doted on them. He made sure to include passages in his letters for Mary to read to the children. "Kiss all the babies for Papa and bid them be good and do as Mama tells them," he wrote. "I have no separate remembrance for either, they are all alike—Charley is Papa's boy—Sissy is the one little duck—Ully is bandy and Mister 4—has a black noodle—Good and sufficient reasons I am sure why Papa should be very fond of them." He loved carrying them up and down the stairs piggyback style, and wanted them to grow up in the country, far from the evils of the city.[41]

When Ully, as the family called him, was just over a year old, Lieutenant Dahlgren went to sea for an extended European training cruise, prompting the family to move from the farm to Wilmington, Delaware. There, Ully "passed five years of happy childhood under the eye of a lovely and affectionate mother," wrote his father, "upon whom the sole charge not unfrequently rested during the absence of her husband in the discharge of professional duties."[42] The laughing, sprightly, mischievous lad brimmed with health, intelligence, and high spirits. "His maternal patronage springing from a family of beautiful and accomplished women, endowed him with whatever is delicate and refined, gentle and endearing, trustful and true in the highest attributes of manhood," noted an observer.[43] His father doted on him, and the boy quickly became the apple of his father's eye.

Little Ully wanted for nothing. "Every accessory to the fullest indulgence of his juvenile activity might be found in the snug, cosy home, which was just fitted for the high place and holiday of children; their happiness unmarred by the fear of spoiling carpets or furniture," remembered the Admiral. "And there, at any time in the day, might be seen and heard little Ully, with his rosy, laughing face,—chirping and galloping around, whip in hand, making terrible commotion among imaginary horses and wagons in the shape of stools and chairs; while near by sat a fond mother, glancing now and then from needle and work towards her boy thus engaged; or, perhaps, when sorely worsted by the sport, demurely poring over his slate, with pencil in hand, limning uncouth but violently active figures, which, to his eye, took the shape of living animals of every description."[44]

John returned from his cruise on November 12, 1845, and walked into his house to find Mary and the children at the dinner table. The children had grown so much that John barely recognized them. Almost nine months to the day later,

their fifth child, Paul, arrived. He enjoyed spending time with his family while he waited for his next assignment, which did not come until January 1847, when he was ordered to ordnance duty at the Department of the Navy's headquarters in Washington, D.C. He also served as Professor of Gunnery at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. This duty quickly proved arduous and exhausting. "One year since I left home for Washington on Ordnance duty," Dahlgren wrote in his diary on January 8, 1848. "Since that time I have returned home on leave four times. Besides the regular duty at Washington, I have been on duty twice to New York in the spring, once to Philadelphia in July, once to Richmond in December, and six times to Annapolis, while doing the duty of Professor of Gunnery at the School—about nineteen hundred and ten miles in all, of travel."[45]

Two months later, the Secretary of the Navy took pity on Dahlgren, whose ordnance work had proved indispensable. The Secretary arranged for Dahlgren to receive an annual allowance of $500.00 for rent, in order to enable him to move his family to Washington. In May 1848, John Dahlgren rented a home in downtown Washington. He then went to Wilmington, gathered his family, and moved them all to the national capital, where he settled into his new job.[46] "And thus little Ully was transplanted to the national capital, where the remainder of his short but glorious life was to be passed, and to receive its future form and direction," noted John in 1872.[47]

Even from a very early age, Ulric Dahlgren felt at home in Washington, where he learned important lessons about power, influence, politics, and intrigue. He learned those lessons well. In particular, he learned first-hand how important political influence and ready access to the halls of power could be beneficial to the advancement of an ambitious young man's career. These lessons served him well during the course of his short but controversial life.

Charles Bunker Dahlgren
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Paul Dahlgren
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

CHAPTER TWO

Growing Up in the Nation's Capital

John Dahlgren discovered his true calling during his tenure at the Washington Navy Yard. While there, he found himself in an important role as a designer and developer of naval ordnance. He had a real genius for designing powerful naval weapons, and his inventions are his greatest legacy to the United States Navy, earning him the proud title, "The Father of Modern Naval Ordnance." His most important contribution was the development of the so-called "Dahlgren gun," a heavy cast-iron, muzzle-loading smoothbore shell gun for use on ships. The nine thousand pound, bottle-shaped gun fired a 9-inch shell, and modernized naval gunnery.[1] "Commander Dahlgren is the best Ordnance officer in the country," declared Commodore Joseph Smith in March 1855, "and the Navy is under the greatest obligation to him for improvements introduced."[2]

On his fortieth birthday, November 13, 1849, he was nearly killed when one of his guns exploded a few feet away from him, killing the unfortunate gunner manning it, and affording Dahlgren a very narrow escape. A court of inquiry ultimately cleared Dahlgren of any wrongdoing and determined that the incident was neither foreseeable nor preventable.[3] The Navy eventually adopted this gun as its main ordnance for ships of the line. In March 1851, as a reward for his innovation and fine service, Congress passed a new Naval Appropriation Bill that included a rider granting Lieutenant Dahlgren the pay of a commander at sea, the princely sum of $2,750.00 per year.[4] On October 11, 1855, he finally received a long overdue promotion to commander. He had spent more than nineteen years as a lieutenant.[5]

Washington, D.C. was an interesting place to raise a child in the 1850s. The city was poised between East and West, as well as between North and South, and was often described as being the "southern element in the great compromise." Indeed, it had a very Southern atmosphere—slavery was legal, and the town had a real tidewater feel about it. It numbered nearly 45,000 residents in 1855, and was one of the largest cities in the United States.[6] "Washington was nothing but a place in which Congress could meet and politicians carry on their games at high stakes for power and place," noted one observer of the antebellum District of Columbia.[7]

Opportunities abounded for an ambitious, politically astute officer, and John