

Milton Wolff
(1915-2008)

Milton Wolff, the last commander of the Lincoln-Washington Battalion consisting of the North American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War and an iconic leader of the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade since the war ended in 1939, died of heart failure in Berkeley, California on January 14. He was 92.

"Nine men commanded the Lincoln and Lincoln-Washington Battalions," wrote Ernest Hemingway at the end of the war; four were dead and four were wounded. The ninth, Milton Wolff, was 23 years old, "tall as Lincoln, gaunt as Lincoln, and as brave and as good a soldier as any that commanded battalions at Gettysburg. He is alive and unhit by the same hazard that leaves one tall palm tree standing where a hurricane has passed."

Born in Brooklyn on October 8, 1915, Wolff stood six feet two in bare feet and a few inches higher in the muddied brown boots he had picked up after swimming across the swollen Ebro River during the great retreats of 1938, just a few months before Hemingway wrote his profile. He had a loud, gravelly voice that was pure Brooklyn. Later, he claimed that was the reason he was picked to lead the Lincoln volunteers at the age of 22, but Wolff knew—he always knew but it embarrassed him—that he possessed a tremendous charisma that won the love of men and women throughout his life. And what all of them also knew was that Milton Wolff was a very intelligent man.

The author Vincent Sheean, who like Hemingway, wrote about the Spanish Civil War for various U.S. newspapers, had witnessed Wolff's unexpected return after being lost six days behind enemy lines and had seen him enter the small hastily-built shelter that served as battalion headquarters after the recent defeat. "You built this thing pretty low," Wolff had deadpanned. "I guess you guys didn't think I was coming back." Then he had taken a plate of garbanzo beans cooked in olive oil, grabbed some long-delayed letters from his girlfriend in New York, and disappeared into a deep silence. "Now he sat doubled up over his beans and his letters," observed Sheean, "his gaunt young face frowning in concentration. I think he knew how glad they all were to see him, and he wanted to ignore it as much as possible."

Wolff described his childhood in an autobiographical work, slightly fictionalized, titled *Member of the Working Class* (2005). His was an ordinary story, tempered by a curious mind confronting hard times. Coming of age in the Depression, a high school drop-out, Wolff took the opportunity to enroll in the New Deal's experimental Civilian Conservation Corps, a military type operation that brought unemployed city boys to work on forestry projects. He loved the physical activity and camaraderie and developed some skill as a first aid assistant. But he also witnessed a bureaucratic indifference that led to the death of one of his friends. For protesting conditions there—his first political act—Wolff was not permitted to reenlist.

He returned to Brooklyn, hung around with neighborhood kids, and found a job in a millinery factory in Manhattan. As part of their social activity, some had joined the Young Communist League and Wolff followed them into the ranks. As he later explained, his political development was rudimentary, but when the Spanish Civil War began in 1936 and one of the YCL organizers asked if there were any volunteers to join the fight, Wolff raised his hand. He planned to serve as a first-aid man.

He sailed for Spain in March 1937. Wolff recounted his experiences as a soldier in the autobiographical novel, *Another Hill* (1994). Moved by the enthusiasm of the other volunteers, he switched from a medical assignment to serve in a machine gun company in the newly formed Washington Battalion and went into action at Brunete in July 1937. Men inches away from him were wounded and killed, but he emerged without a nick.

A few weeks later, while on leave in Madrid, his captain, Philip Detro from Texas steered him to the Café Chicote on the Gran Via. There he met Ernest Hemingway. The 21-year old Wolff was not impressed. "Ernest is quite childish in many respects," he wrote to a friend in Brooklyn. "He wants very much to be a martyr....So much for writers," he concluded. "I'd much rather read their works than be with them."

Within a month, Wolff was fighting on the Aragon front, leading a section of the machine gun company at Belchite and Quinto. By October, he commanded the machine gunners at Fuentes de Ebro. At Teruel, in January 1938, Wolff was a captain and an adjutant. Two months later, when a direct hit destroyed the battalion headquarters and killed the leadership, Wolff became the

commander. He led the soldiers through the treacherous retreats, avoided capture, and wandered alone behind enemy lines until managing to swim across the Ebro.

Wolff assumed responsibility for rebuilding the broken battalion. During the training period, Robert Capa, the legendary photographer, captured Wolff standing next to Hemingway, a visual contradiction: Hemingway, stocky, an adventurer in his half-opened zippered jacket; Wolff, lanky in uniform, a beret covering his thick, dark hair, but shy, hands in his pockets, face turned downward, impatient to get on with the war.

A few weeks later, the photograph appeared in a New York Yiddish newspaper. To her surprise, Wolff's mother finally discovered what her absent son was doing in Spain. Not, as he had reported in his letters, working in a factory so that a Spanish worker could fight for the Republic, but leapfrogging through the military ranks. A "nobody at home," the soldier-poet Edwin Rolfe wrote about Wolff in his diary; "leader of men here."

Wolff led the Lincolns back across the Ebro during the summer of 1938, held them in the lines of the violent Hill 666 in the Sierra Pandols, until ordered to turn over the battalion to Spanish officers as the government arranged for the withdrawal of foreign troops in 1938. In a ceremonial transfer of authority, Wolff was promoted to the rank of Major.

It was then that the prominent American sculptor Jo Davidson was making clay busts of the Spanish leaders and proposed including an American face. When he saw Wolff's shaggy hair and gaunt features, Davidson asked him to model. Misunderstanding the image he projected, Wolff first had a haircut and shave, nearly causing the furious sculptor to cancel the session.

The resulting clay composition inspired Hemingway's eulogy to Wolff, in which he compared him to Lincoln. "He is a retired major now at twenty-three and still alive," wrote Hemingway, "and pretty soon he will be coming home as other men in age and rank came home after the peace at Appomattox courthouse long ago. Except the peace was made at Munich now and no good men will be home for long."

Wolff, of course, admired the elegant prose. But his heart and soul were always with the rank and file. Back in New York, some of the returned veterans of the Lincoln Brigade read the reports from Spain with amusement: "Hemingway and [Herbert] Matthews say he looks just like Lincoln. Wonder when they saw Lincoln."

After Spain

Wolff's iconic stature kept him at the forefront of the struggle to save the Spanish Republic, even after General Francisco Franco claimed military victory in 1939. He participated in street protests in New York, urging Washington officials to lift the embargo on shipments to Spain and to provide assistance for the Spanish refugees trapped in French concentration camps. When the French government threatened to deport these victims of war back to Franco's Spain, where many would face summary execution, Wolff joined other Lincoln veterans in demonstrations outside the French consulate in New York. He was arrested in 1940 for this activity and served fifteen days in jail.

While in court, Wolff was abruptly subpoenaed to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee in the spring of 1940, the first of many tangles with the government's anti-Communist crusade. Although Wolff had joined the Young Communist League before going to Spain and had nominally joined the Communist Party of Spain during the war, he always insisted he had not joined the U.S. Communist Party even though he sympathized with its policies. To the government, it was a distinction without a difference, and Wolff's movements would be monitored closely by the FBI and other government agencies for decades. Meanwhile, when faced with government inquiries, he answered questions selectively.

From his wartime friendship with journalist Vincent Sheean, Wolff had fortuitously met William Donovan, chosen by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to head the newly formed Office of Strategic Services, forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency. During the spring of 1941, Donovan summoned Wolff to his offices in Wall Street and requested Wolff's assistance in recruiting Lincoln veterans to work for British intelligence. According to Wolff and backed by sparse documentary evidence, this conversation occurred before the German invasion of the Soviet Union and so violated the official Communist position of non-participation in World War II. Wolff's willingness to cooperate with OSS reflected his flexibility about ideology: though a man of great principles and ideals, he avoided dogma and rhetoric, and appreciated the imperfections of given situations.

Wolff spent the next year working quietly with British intelligence officials. When the bombing of Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war, Wolff sent a telegram to President Roosevelt offering the services of the Lincoln Brigade in the war effort. He also assisted Donovan's OSS in recruiting Lincoln veterans for special projects that would later bear fruit in U.S. victories in North Africa, Italy, and the Normandy invasion.

But Wolff saw himself first as a soldier and wanted to participate in the military defeat of fascism. In 1942, he enlisted in the U.S. Army, expecting to serve as an infantryman in battle and to bring his military experience to speed the victory. Those illusions soon confronted a military establishment that saw Spanish Civil War veterans as "premature anti-fascists" and so considered them unacceptable for combat assignments. To his growing frustration, the Army dropped Wolff from Officer Candidate School and gave him non-combatant assignments.

While pulling strings to get a transfer, Wolff picked an assignment that took him to Burma where he saw action under the General Joseph Stilwell. Soon afterward, the OSS summoned Wolff to Italy, where he joined other Lincoln veterans he had earlier recruited such as Irving Goff, Vincent Lossowski, and Irving Fajans in establishing intelligence networks among the Communist partisans. One of Wolff's proudest achievements was graduating from parachute school, but he was on the ground when he was sent into southern France on a secret mission that was never consummated. However, while there he met members of the Spanish resistance planning to invade Spain. Wolff's efforts to bring them OSS assistance resulted in his hasty recall and a transfer back to the United States.

In the post-World War II climate, Wolff and other Lincoln vets continued to work for Spanish democracy, tirelessly lobbying the State Department to break relations with Franco Spain, and to gain assistance for Spanish refugees and prisoners of the Franco regime. At a time when the U.S. government was creating an anti-Communist alliance that included Franco Spain, however, Wolff's leadership position alarmed the FBI, which kept him under constant surveillance.

When the Department of Justice classified the Veterans of the Lincoln Brigade as a subversive organization in 1947 and the McCarran Act of 1950 obliged the veterans to register with the government, Wolff emerged as the public face of the VALB. He and Moe Fishman presided over the defense of the veterans before the Subversive Activities Control Board in hearings during 1954 and carried the subsequent appeals through the federal courts. During this period, Wolff also worked for the embattled Civil Rights Congress, a left-wing organization that defended African Americans accused on dubious grounds of capital crimes.

As the anti-Communist crusade abated in the 1960s, Wolff remained active in the U.S. Committee for a Democratic Spain, an organization that lobbied against U.S. treaties with the Franco regime, assisted the families of Franco's political prisoners, and advocated for political reform. Wolff also led the revitalized VALB in demonstrations against the Vietnam War. At one point, he wrote a personal letter to Ho Chi Minh offering the services of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. He also advocated ending the trade embargo with Cuba and helped provide medical aid to a children's hospital in Havana.

During the 1980s, Wolff and other veterans instituted a campaign to send ambulances to Nicaragua, an echo of U.S. domestic support for the Spanish Republic fifty years earlier. Invited frequently to return to Spain, Wolff was a beloved figure among Spaniards. In a recent visit, he won cheers when he reminded them that if they got into trouble in the future, "give me a call."

As he reached his later years, Wolff devoted more time to painting and writing his memoirs in fictional form. He had recently finished a draft of a third volume, dealing with his experiences in World War II.

Through it all, Milton Wolff saw himself as a man of action. For all of his thought and intellect, he knew how to make decisions and get things done. Sometimes, his impulses led to frustrating mistakes, as when he joined the Army in expectations of organizing an invasion of Spain and found himself exiled as a potential subversive. But he never doubted the choice he made to fight in Spain.

In 2005, nearly seventy years after he'd swum the river waters, he stood at the rail of a boat on the Ebro and paused for a long moment of silence. Then he evoked the men who had died there beside him—"I call them my dead," he said—and dropped a bundle of red carnations into the water. Now he is with them.

--Peter N. Carroll