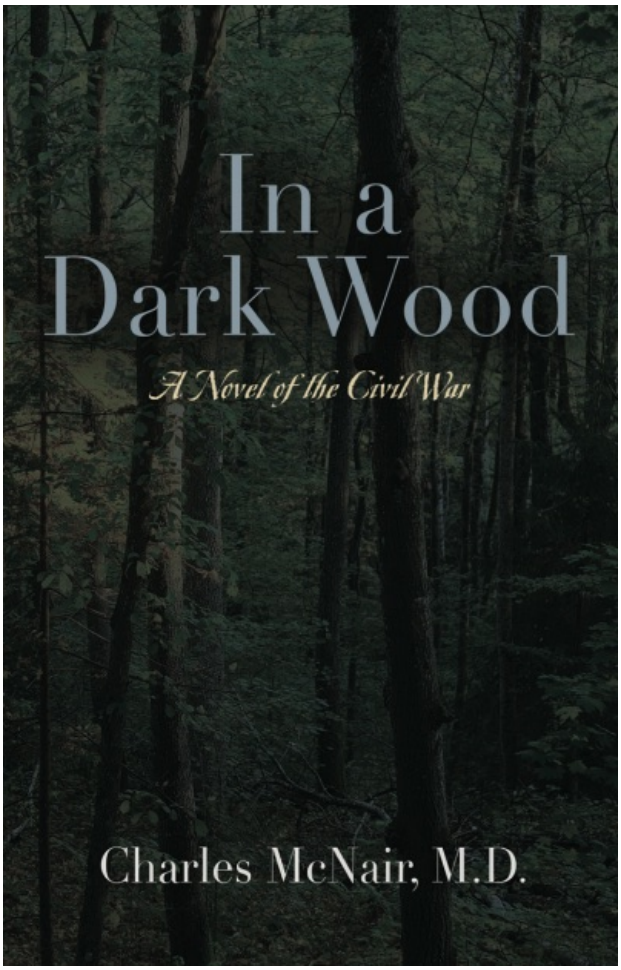


This is a novel about the Battle of the Wilderness fought over three days in May, 1864. It was a bloody encounter costing 29,000 casualties. It was the first battle commanded by U S Grant and Robert E Lee and was the first battle of modern warfare.

**In a Dark Wood**
By Charles McNair M.D.

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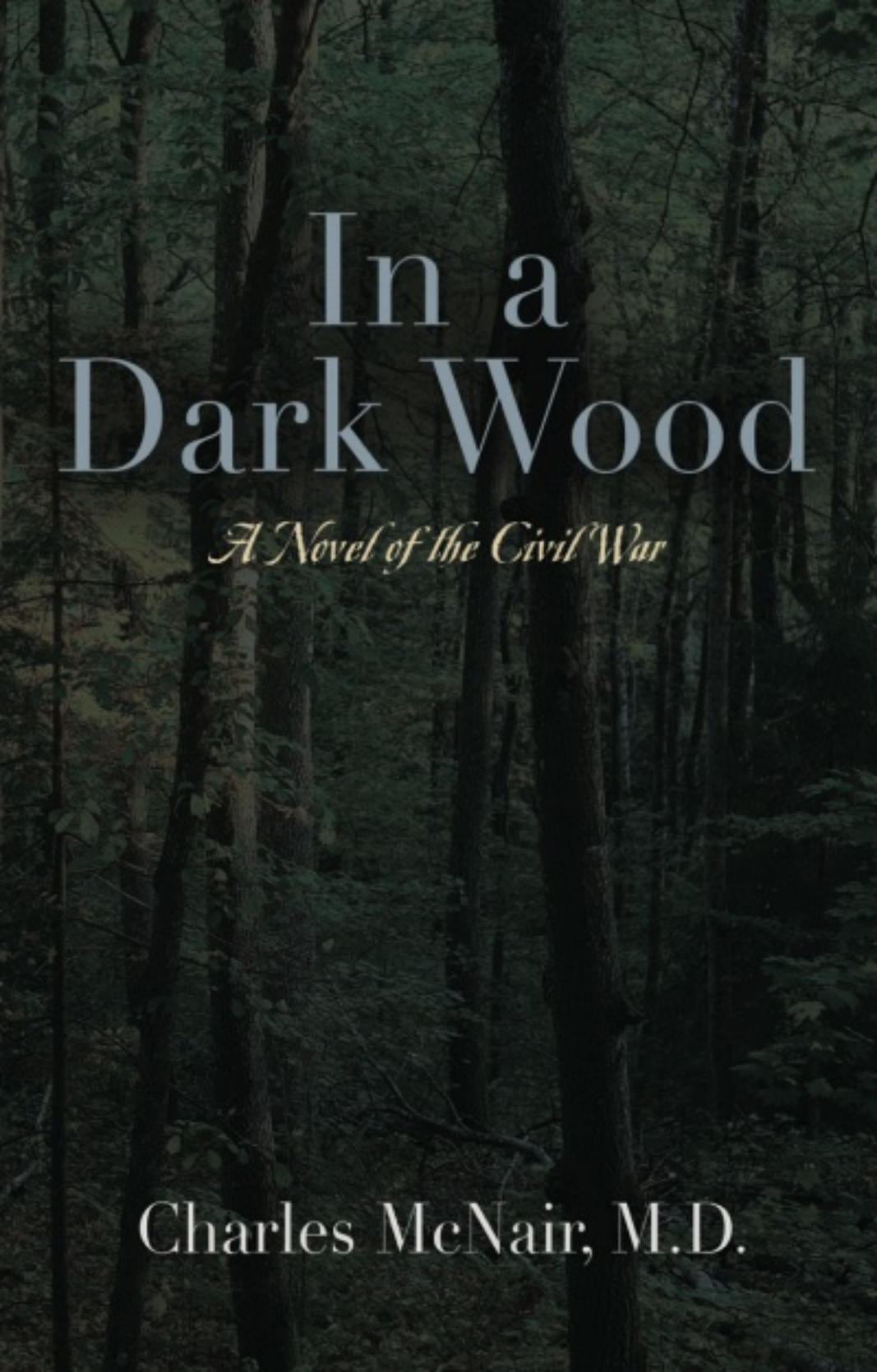
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Charles McNair, M.D.

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## Characters

Pvt. Mathias Aiken, 13th Pennsylvania Reserves (The Rifles), Vth Corps, Army of the Potomac

Pvt. Benjamin Nash Davis, 3rd Indiana Cavalry, Vth Corps, Army of the Potomac

Pvt. Friederick Hanover, 1st New York Light Artillery, Battery L, Vth Corps, Army of the Potomac

Pvt. Amos Parcher, 1st North Carolina, Steuart's Brigade, 2nd Corps, Army of Northern Virginia

Sally Parcher, nurse at Chimborazo Hospital, Richmond, Virginia

Ezekiel and Mary Parcher, Amos and Sally's parents

Pvt. Daniel McKetrick, 1st North Carolina, Steuart's Brigade, 2nd Corps, Army of Northern Virginia

Carl and Elizabeth McKetrick, Daniel's parents

Braithe Glyn, Quaker nurse with the Army of the Potomac

Clemson Pride, Union ambulance driver

Alexander Anderson, Union ambulance driver

# Chapter 1

## Albemarle

Summer-Fall 1863

Two days and still no sign of the boat. She always worried whenever the boys took the boat out.

They always thought of themselves as these great mariners, Sally thought. Neither one could swim and yet they insisted on going out in all kinds of weather. She remembered Amos, her brother, casting his weather eye up into the darkening clouds.

"Hell", he said, "we've a good hour before anything breaks from that. We'll row the boat out, do us some clamming, and then sail back in on the first wind. We won't even get wet." She now watched as the towering cloud wall swept in from Currituck Sound and onto the waters of the Albemarle, whipping the normally placid surface into foam-capped, jagged furrows. She had been bent over, the hot wet air long past soaking her calico work skirt, rivulets of sweat running down to her fingers, making her grip on the tobacco leaves tenuous. As her anger at the boys and fear for their futures grew, each sand sucker became a personal affront to her. She viciously tore at the stalks, peppering her face with the dry sandy soil along the shore of Albemarle

Sound. The grit got into her eyes, making them water. It coated her teeth and throat, magnifying her thirst. All of this discomfort growing into suffering. All of this she blamed on the boys and their maddening disregard for her feelings.

The boat had very low gunwales; it leaked and pitched steeply with even the smallest chop. Just having a stick for a mast and a square of cloth filled more with holes than canvas did not make it a stable sailer the way the boys bragged. They had made it through a few quick storms, fast in coming and just as fast ending, but what was coming presaged far worse than they had seen this season.

"They are just selfish braggarts," she said out loud. The loss of even one of them would mean the loss of both their farms, so desperate was their families' hold on the land. Any of the larger landowners would swoop in at the first missed rent payment and throw them off the land which had been their only way to earn a living. But the boys did not care. They would do whatever they liked.

She was working herself up into a fine rage, one that she knew she would enjoy unleashing on the boys. She took her angry worry out on the weeds and sand lugs, ripping them out with fury as she worked her way down the row of tobacco. Now the first gusts hit her. Still she did not look up at the water, as if the bay would remain as calm as when she last looked at it. But if she were to watch the storm's approach, she would bring down the full force of it and doom the boys.

With what Sally now saw approaching, she despaired of ever seeing her brother or Daniel McKetrick again. The boys had indeed been unable to get back in before the vicious storm hit. Sally Parcher looked for them at the seaward end of each row of tobacco she harrowed: pinching off the lower leaves looking for tobacco worms, arching her back straight again, scanning the waters. She became covered with sticky sap from the leaves but the nicotine in the sap kept the bugs away. She turned down the next row, willing herself not to look back until she reached the water end of her row.

Her brother, Amos, and his friend, Daniel McKetrick, had taken the clamming boat east along the shore to the Alligator River hoping to harvest the clams and oysters in the shallows. The Sound was not much more than twenty feet deep with a very gentle shelf so they clammed as far as a mile from shore. She had often gone out with them, bagging the catch in a burlap sack. She never became comfortable with the dipping of the boat, sometimes shipping water over the side that made her scream and Daniel laugh. The boys leaned over the gunwale and plunged the fork deep into the mud then pulled the foul-smelling muck to the surface. Sally watched Daniel's well-muscled, tanned back as he worked. She imagined being able to loiter over the hard, round muscles, feeling their heat and sweat, and holding him. To Daniel McKetrick, she was nothing more than Amos' kid sister, to be teased and taunted. She did catch him one day in church looking at her with – longing, lust? The way he turned bright red as he ducked back into his hymnal did give her hope.

Sally grew more worried with no sign of the boys returning. Neither of them could swim and if their boat swamped, there would be nothing to do except collect the bodies. Loss of any one member of their families would mean loss of their farms. No one in their county had slaves. Sally had seen Negroes only in Plymouth at the auctions and the curing barns. The sun was getting lower in the western sky. Fortunately, the Sound did not have a significant tide for the boys to struggle against but the wind was set from the east and the dinghy was not much of a sailer. A third night on the water would almost certainly mean they would not be returning.

Mary and Ezekiel Parcher and Carl and Elizabeth McKetrick had adjoining forty-acre farms along the southern bank of the Sound about five miles east of the mouth of the Roanoke River.

Tobacco was the principal crop and between the two families they had sixty acres planted. The ten acres of vegetable patches, corn, wheat and potatoes, were for their own consumption. Between them they owned one mule, two wagons and the clamming boat. The families worked each other's farms and shared the profit, if there was any. The nearest town was Plymouth on the Roanoke River. The land, which barely rose above sea level, was sandy and their crops required constant attention. Daniel was the McKetricks' only child still living. A baby girl had died of the quinsy in her first year. Two other siblings, both boys, had died of typhus on a "Coffin Ship" while making the dangerous passage from Ullapool in the northern

highlands of Scotland to Wilmington, North Carolina. Daniel's parents were also infected but recovered.

The family had been crofters on the thin, rocky soil of Wester Ross. The absentee landlord had found that the white-faced Cheviot sheep were more profitable than his human tenants who had worked the land for several generations. The McKetricks along with the other families in the broad glen were victims of "the Clearances": the forced evacuations by truncheon and gunpoint to the coasts.

Their crofts were set on fire, sometimes with the families still inside. Their sons serving in the King's Army and Navy would return home after years' absences to find nothing left of their homes and no way to find out what happened to their families. Some families had tried to survive as harvesters of kelp which was used for its nitrate content to manufacture gunpowder. That source of employment dried up with the ready availability of bird guano, which was much richer in nitrate. Faced with the choice of emigration or starvation, desperate mothers used their rings to scratch messages on the Croick parish kirk's cheap window glass, hoping their sons would see them: "McKye left for America, '42"; "Macinnes family fled to America, God help us, '42"; "Macivers to America, '41."

By the summer of 1842, the McKetricks found themselves with two trunks containing all they had in the world embarking on a repurposed timber ship which had carried oak logs from America. Rather than lose money on an empty return trip, the vessel's owners filled it with immigrants fleeing rapacious landlords, poverty, famine.

The passage cost five pounds per adult, three pounds per child. There were no refunds for deaths during the passage.

Three hundred men, women and children were crammed below decks. They were allowed on deck for only one hour a day, weather permitting. There they gathered around the few stoves to cook what food they could and try to dry out in the rare sunshine. During storms, they were confined to their bunks, the hatches battened down, sometime for days at a time. The decks were soon awash with excrement from spilled slop buckets, vomit and seawater seeping through the rotting hulls. Most of the children's deaths occurred during these times. When the weather cleared, parents were allowed on deck to bury, really throw, their dead children overboard to the waiting sharks. Typhus usually began its fatal rampage through the passengers three weeks into the voyage, which for the McKetricks lasted ten weeks.

Landing in Wilmington in the fall of 1842 was the only bit of luck the McKetricks had seen for a while. Scottish immigrants from Wester Ross had been arriving for a few years and the Presbyterian Church gave them shelter, aid, and held a service for all who had died during the voyage. They cast about in the Wilmington area but all the non-swamp land had been taken. They had no resources to start as shopkeepers so when news of cheap land up north along the Albemarle Sound became known, they jumped at the chance. Carl bought a hand truck large enough to carry their trunks and, with him pulling and Elizabeth pushing, they made their way north. Three years later, their farm was

productive enough to supply a living. Daniel, their only child, was born that year, 1845, and into him, Carl and Elizabeth poured all their love and hope.

The Parchers came south from the Virginia tidewater where they had farmed successfully for five years until three crop failures in a row forced them from their land. The sandy soil along the Albemarle shore was much poorer than they were used to and tobacco was the only reasonable cash crop they could raise. The two families grew together and soon began to farm and live communally.

Sally and Amos Parcher were one year apart, he was seventeen in 1862, she sixteen. With their parents, the seven of them managed to scrape a living from the farms. The tobacco crop was the key to their collective survival and so was carefully tended by all. The curing barns were in Plymouth, and once a month during the growing season the wagon was filled with the leaves and taken to the auction.

#

"Daniel, look over there," Amos called out. Daniel had been bent over the gunwale dragging the shallows of the Albemarle Sound for clams. He looked back at Amos, then forward over the outlet of the bay into Currituck Sound. A cloud wall, black as death, stretched from the water's surface to as high as he could see. Around them was still: no wave; no wind. The cloud bank seemed to swallow the water as it approached.

"Mother of God, Amos, row! Maybe we can get in before it hits us."

He dropped his clamming fork and began to paddle with hands. Amos dropped the useless sail and fitted the oars into their locks. He pulled with all his strength but made little progress escaping the onrushing storm wall. Outrunning it was not going to work. All he could do was point the bow into the building wind and waves.

"Hang on!" The boys centered themselves low in the boat, gripping the gunwales. The chop, screaming wind, and rain hit them without preamble. The bow pitched nearly straight up and they began to ship water. Amos scuttled back to the stern to work the rudder and keep the bow pointed into the wind. Daniel started baling with the can. The pitching boat nearly threw him out more than once. Each time he rose to throw the water to leeward, the force of the gale threatened to cast him overboard. Around them was whirling, stinging, howling spume. They could not see beyond the confines of the boat. Wild gyrations tossed them about, bashing them against the thwarts. The clamming fork tines dug into Daniel's thigh, adding his blood to the deepening waters in the boat. Only the shallowness of the sound prevented large waves from building and the short fetch of the Sound kept the crests low. Lightning was their only illumination, flashing upon unpromising prospects. The thunder was palpable, concussive waves pounding them as if from nearby explosions. Flash after flash, blow after blow struck the steadily weakening boys.

They were now far down the Sound, near the mouth of the Chowan River on the north shore. They could not see the quieter water and in any event steering the boat

purposefully was impossible. Amos' strength was failing. Daniel had barely enough left to lift half a can over the gunwale. His puncture wound had closed on itself due to swelling and immersion in the cold water, but he had lost a lot of blood. The boys were near to giving up, willing to just lie down in the bottom of the boat and let the storm do what it would with them. Amos was not sure at first but he soon convinced himself that the storm murk was thinning. He could see quieter water over Daniel's glistening back. He found the sea flattening and the wind finally abating.

"You, Daniel, I think it's settling down some. Keep baling."

The boat was riding low in the water. Even with the storm dying down, water still overlapped the sides. Soon, though, Amos felt he could risk raising the sail and steer for the land he could see off their port side. He did not know where in the Sound they were, but now that it looked as if they would live little while longer, he did not much care.

McKetrick was losing more strength. He stopped baling and was sliding into a warm doze. His mind wandered back to Sally Parcher and her summer church dress: the glint of the sun off her auburn hair; the dancing blue eyes; the shadowed curve of her body when the sun was behind her. Amos, prodding him with the oar, brought him back to the reality of the sinking boat.

"What, what do you want?"

"I want you to keep baling so maybe we can get into shore. Look, we're maybe thirty yards off."

The wind shifted as the storm lessened and now worked in their favor. Another five minutes of rowing and baling brought their keel grinding onto the north shore. The boys lay exhausted in the bloody water sloshing in the bottom of the boat. That was how they spent their first night.

They awoke to the sun filtering through the thinned but still scudding clouds. The rain had stopped but the wind continued to turn from east to north. Parcher said, “Come on, Daniel, wind’s shifting. If we’re gonna make it back, now’s the time.”

They dragged themselves out onto the shore and emptied the boat as best they could. There was still half a foot in the bottom. They pushed it out into the deeper water and struggled back in. Once the sodden sail filled with wind, their hopes began to rise. Midway across the sound, freshening gusts caused the wallowing boat to take on water again. Running before the wind, the sail did nothing but drive the bow into the waves, shipping more water. The sail came down and Daniel started baling, Amos rowing.

“Listen, Daniel, if you can’t bale any better than that then we are in trouble.”

“You call that what you’re doing rowing? More like splashing to me. Have we gotten any closer to the shallows?”

“Maybe the wind will die down and we can get somewhere.”

The two boys had nothing with them in the foundering boat. The blood-stained rain water in the bottom of the boat was all they had to drink. They had just gone off for an afternoon of clamming, no different than hundreds of times before. Now in their second day out on the water, sunburned and tiring fast, both knew that this was their last chance at making landfall. They could be sure at least that they were heading for the south shore of the Sound. McKetrick was too weak to bale; Parcher was near collapsing. Once again, the thought of giving up loomed. The chop was lessening and they were no longer shipping water. At last, the keel grounded in the shallows of the south shore. This time, they did not even try to get out of the boat, too exhausted to move. The water level in the boat was so high that they ran the risk of drowning in the boat if they passed out. After a half hour, Amos was able to rouse himself a little.

"Come on, you, Daniel, get up. Let's get that leg looked after."

"Lemme be. I can no more get out of this boat than fly."

"Can't leave you here. Sally'd never forgive me if I came back alone."

This got McKetrick's attention. "What do you know about it? Has she said anything about me?"

Parcher arched his back up onto the thwart, scraping his sunburn badly. From there, he swung his legs over the gunwales, still not able to sit up. "She doesn't need to say anything. I've caught you two eyeing each other out

working the tobacco and at church. You always helping her with the wagon and riding into Plymouth. No big secret."

McKetrick hooked his arms over the gunwales, resting his head on the rough wood. "But she ain't said nothing specific, has she?"

"Don't be getting any swelled head, now. Who else is she going to meet around here? It's not like you won any big contest or anything."

McKetrick was getting angry now as his friend had hoped. That gave him enough strength to heave himself out of the boat. With the tipping, Parcher slid off the thwart and they were both finally on the shore. The twilight wind chilled them. They dipped their hands back into the bloody water and drank the brackish bilge.

"Where do you think we are?" asked Parcher.

"Don't care beyond that we're on the south shore and that way is west where home should be. They got to be pretty worried about us, I should think."

"'Specially Sally," Parcher said.

"You shut up about that." The boys tried to drag the boat up on the shore but that was beyond them. "Do you think she might be a little worried?" They began to stagger west and toward home.

They had not gotten far when they were spotted by the search party composed of the McKetricks. They had blankets and soup in a pottery crock. Wrapped up and with the warm soup, the rescued made it back to their homes.

McKetrick was limping badly on his punctured leg and his mother made an embarrassing fuss over him. The Parchers had searched the shore to the west and now were returning when they saw the approaching party. Sally gave out a sharp cry and ran down the beach. She knocked McKetrick over when she sprang into his arms. She cried then laughed and finally started punching his shoulder.

"Daniel McKetrick, don't you never do anything like this again, you hear me?"

It was all he could do to keep from crying out when she pressed his wounded leg. Her father said, "Sally, get off that boy. Can't you see he's hurt?" Sally recoiled with a look of fearful concern.

"Are you hurt, Daniel? Where? Lemme see."

"Sally, let him be 'til we get them back to the house."

The parents exchanged knowing glances over the heads of their children. They made it back to the McKetricks' where the full extent of Daniel's wound could be seen. The thigh was swollen and turning warm. The opening was still shut. His mother began boiling water and the fathers, with Amos, went out to the barn they shared. They were knowledgeable amateur veterinarians, having the necessary skills to care for the few animals they had.

"We'd best open that leg up," said Carl McKetrick, "so it can drain. No drawing salve's going to work if it stays sealed shut." He picked up a gelding knife.

"I know you're right, but sweet Jesus, that is going to hurt pretty bad," replied Ezekiel Parcher.

"Look, you shouldn't have to do it. Give it to me." McKetrick handed it over and Parcher went into the house, dropping the knife into the boiling water.

"Sally, you go on outside with your mother."

"No, Daddy, I want to stay here with Daniel." Her father looked to his wife.

"Come on, honey, let's get some air." The two fathers were alone in the house with their sons.

Parcher fished the knife out of the pot and turned to Daniel whose eyes widened when he saw the gelding knife. Amos positioned himself by Daniel's head, ready to hold him down if needed.

"Honest, Mr. Parcher, Sally and me are just friends. We ain't never done nothing beyond a kiss now and then. Ain't no call for that." He began to back up on the bed, terror-stricken.

"Now, Daniel," his father said," we got to do it or it's just going to get worse."

"It'll just hurt for a second," reassured Sally's father.

Daniel, panicking and losing all control, began to cry. Amos grabbed Daniel's shoulders. McKetrick was now embarrassed and annoyed at what he thought of as his son's cowardice.

"Daniel, get a hold of yourself. Be a man."

"How can I be if you all do that to me?"

The fathers looked at the terrorized boy, then down at the gelding knife. McKetrick started to laugh. Parcher looked at the knife and then at Daniel. He started to laugh as well.

"I'm glad you think this is so funny," shouted Daniel.

"This is for your leg, you idiot. We got to open that track up or it'll fester and you will lose the whole thing. We are not going to cut your balls off, son."

Daniel looked at his father who smiled and shook his head. "Oh, alright, then, go on ahead." He laid back on the bed.

Sally had to be held back by her mother. "Daniel, Daniel, what are they doing to you? Daniel, answer me."

Parcher dipped a clean rag in the hot water and washed off Daniel's leg. "Go ahead and answer Sally." Daniel raised and turned toward the door.

"I'm fine…" he started, then ended with a yelp as Parcher made a deep cut with the curved gelding knife. "Dammit, why not give me a little warning?" Sally burst through the door and knelt by the pale, sweaty boy. Blood flowed freely from the cut. Daniel felt the pressure in his thigh reduce immediately.

"There, that ought to help," said Parcher. He leaned down next to Daniel's ear and whispered, "But don't ever give me any cause to do the other thing to you, boy."

#

The two families shared a small drying barn but it was not big enough to handle the tobacco output of both the farms. Every month, they loaded the wagon with the dried leaf, hitched on behind the mule and drove into Plymouth's curing barns. Daniel was little help with the farms until his leg healed. He drove the wagon, often with Sally by his side. They set off early in the morning to be able to make the twenty-mile round-trip in a day. They picked up whatever supplies were available in the stores in Plymouth.

The Albemarle Sound and Plymouth had been under Union control since the end of 1862. The town was about seven miles the Roanoke River. The land to the north of the river was all swamp and delta. The southern land approaches were guarded by two forts and, without passable roads to support a Rebel army, the area was securely under Union control. The Union's main interest in the region was to cut the rail lines running from Wilmington. The river channel was shallow and shifting, making a waterborne attack on the town very difficult. There were forts above and below the town along the river bank.

The far upper reaches of the Roanoke were still under Confederate control. Shallow-draft gun boats sallied downriver to shell the town and the forts. Without infantry support, these attacks were mainly a nuisance. The gun boats were easily driven off by the Union shore batteries. Of more concern was the construction of the ironclad CSS Albemarle. Its destruction was contemplated but the Union forces did not have the strength to successfully attack her. When launched the following year, 1864, the Albemarle

would sweep aside the Union fleet on the Roanoke and retake Plymouth.

The garrisons of the two small Union forts on the Roanoke consisted of twenty-eight hundred troops. The hatred for these Yankees was heightened by the fact that only about four hundred were regulars from Pennsylvania. Two thousand were US Colored Infantry and the rest were North Carolina Unionists. Although there was not a significant Rebel army presence around Plymouth, there were mounted irregulars loosely attached to Mosby's and Pickett's raiders. The Union men were limited to infrequent mounted patrols. If any were captured, they were summarily executed.

Sally and Daniel knew the families of all the farms they passed on their way to Plymouth. They were like their own -- run by families, none of whom had slaves. But as the war took hold and siphoned off young men, the farms were sold or leased to a few of the richer families who put their slaves to work the land. Leasing allowed families to stay on the land, often only keeping their homes and a few acres for themselves. The Parchers and McKetricks, by pooling their expenses, resources, and labor survived. Losing Daniel's labor, even for a brief time put a strain on both families. His leg wound was healing but he was still not much help. He mainly followed Sally around making sure she still felt sorry for him. One thing he could do was drive the wagon into Plymouth to sell their leaf. He and Sally hitched up the mule. Daniel made a show of struggling onto the seat next to Sally. They set off after securing the pitchfork they would need to unload their tobacco in Plymouth. It had been a

mild fall and their leaf had dried evenly, none lost to mold. The wagon had the last of that year's crop. Once out of sight of the farms, Sally moved closer to Daniel, resting her head on his shoulder, and was soon drowsing to the steady rocking of the wagon.

The mule knew the way, needing no guidance from Daniel who was also soon dozing. They had gotten about halfway when Daniel awakened to the sound of approaching horsemen.

"Sally, wake up."

"What is it?"

"Horsemen coming up the road. Just two of them, looks like. Must be from the fort." Daniel looked for a side road they could pull into, maybe get to a farm before the men were upon them. But they had been spotted and the two riders spurred their mounts to overtake the wagons. Sally pulled closer to Daniel who picked up the reins to urge the mule forward.

"Who are they?" Sally asked.

"Looks like some of the militia from the fort. Hopefully, they have somewhere to be."

The riders separated to thunder by either side of the wagon, whooping and waving their hats. They at first did not seem to be stopping and Daniel and Sally relaxed a little. The riders had only gone down the road a bit to make sure there was no one else coming. Then they returned and followed along behind the wagon. They were snickering as

they sized up the two teenagers. They came forward, flanking the wagon. One reached over and took the reins.

"What do you think we've got here, Josh?" as he pulled the mule to a stop.

"Looks like a couple of Secesh with some contraband, Tom."

Daniel put on as brave a front as he could. The riders had Spencer carbines and Colt revolvers. Their accents were pure North Carolina, marking them as the hated Union volunteers, known for their lawlessness and cruelty.

"We're bringing our tobacco into Plymouth to sell to you all. If you could let us get on, we got to get there and back home before sundown. Much obliged," Daniel finished and reached for the reins.

"Is that right? And who might this be?" leered Tom as he took a long look at Sally. He reached for her. Daniel sprang across the seat and onto the rider, knocking him to the ground. Sally screamed.

Josh came off his horse in no hurry and pulled Daniel off Tom by his overalls. With a single, vicious backhand, he knocked Daniel unconscious and threw him down into the ditch. Tom was up and pulled his Colt, putting the barrel against Daniel's head. Sally screamed again, distracting the riders.

Josh said, "Plenty of time to deal with him later. I say we see what we got here." He grabbed Sally and threw her into the back of the wagon. She screamed and kicked at the

two men, clawing at their faces. Tom closed his hand around her throat and began choking her.

"Now, listen here, girl. You be nice to us and maybe we let your boyfriend and you live after we're done. Otherwise, you don't really have to be awake for all of this. We'll have just as much fun either way." Her eyes widened and tears started but she quieted down. "That's better."

Tom ripped her dress open and pulled down her camisole, revealing her breasts. "How long's it been since we had us a white woman, Josh?"

"Too damned long to wait any longer." Tom continued to hold Sally down while Josh undid his pants. They were intent on Sally, laughing at her terror and pleas. Tom climbed up into the wagon and jerked her legs apart. A throttled cry broke from her as he positioned himself over her. He squeezed her breasts and was about to enter her when his face grew puzzled and he reached around to his back. Blood spurted from his mouth and he collapsed on Sally. Daniel pulled the pitchfork from between Josh's ribs. Tom was frozen just long enough for Daniel to run the pitchfork into his face and eyes. He fell backwards out of the wagon onto the road. Daniel was on him before he could pull his Colt from his belt. He plunged the tines into Tom's chest twice more until he was sure he was dead.

"Daniel, Daniel, oh, God, get him off me!" Daniel pulled Tom off and out of the wagon. Sally covered herself with her ruined, blood-stained dress. Tobacco leaves clung to her, sticky with blood. Daniel held her as she shuddered and cried into his shirt.

"Sally, it's alright. It's alright, you're safe with me. But we got to get out of here before anyone else comes. Do you understand?" She could only nod her head and sob. Daniel took his shirt off and wrapped it around Sally, then put her into the wagon. He dragged the two men into the ditch, covering them as best he could with the brush by the side of the road. Their horses, used to this violence and more, were placidly grazing. Daniel retrieved the Spencers and cartridge boxes, hiding them with the Colts deep under the tobacco leaves. He turned the bloody leaves over so no blood showed. It nearly killed him to have to leave the horses but there was no way he could sell, hide or explain them away. He pointed them back down the road toward Plymouth and slapped them on their rumps. Last of all, he came back to Sally.

"Ok, now. You've got to stop crying. Lie down under the tobacco and stay quiet. I'll take us back home. If anyone meets us on the road, you stay as quiet as a mouse. Don't move, don't make a sound. You are safe now." She took his face in her hands and kissed him, then let him cover her with the tobacco leaf. Daniel turned the mule for home, five miles away. They met no one else on the road home.

Mary and Elizabeth, the mothers, took charge of the hysterically sobbing Sally. They brought her into the Parcher's house, cleaned her up and then sat by her until she fell asleep. The fathers, Ezekiel and Carl, along with Amos, took Daniel into the barn. Daniel took out the rifles and pistols he had taken from the dead Unionists.

"You are sure," began Carl, "that no one saw you coming or going on the road? You are absolutely positive?"

"I swear. Those bastards made sure too, not wanting to be interrupted, I guess."

"Alright, alright," McKetrick said as he paced up and down the length of the barn. He stopped to heft the Spencer, only to put it back in the wagon. "I don't think anybody's going to come looking for those two until tomorrow. By the time the horses get back, it will be dark. We cannot be found with these guns but can't give them to anyone or sell them. Bury them, I guess, would be the answer for now."

"Our wagon will be expected in town," Parcher said. "Word gets out that we didn't show, that will look pretty suspicious, too. "

"They might think they were bushwacked by some of Mosby's boys," suggested Amos.

"Not likely they'd let the horses get away. And Mosby's men would have shot them, not stabbed them."

"Then maybe some Negros got them or they got into a fight and did themselves in," Amos' voice trailed off.

Parcher said in a low, tremoring voice, "No, I think it is only a matter of time before they come looking here. These local redlegs – militia they call themselves, nothing but murdering thieves – if they find the boys here, they'll hang them and probably us with them. They'll feel they must make an example of someone. It is likely they will kill us, do whatever they want to Mary, Liz and Sally. "

The two fathers continued pacing. Daniel and Amos watched them with growing concern.

"Papa, I am so sorry I brought this on us," said Daniel.

"Don't you say that, Daniel. You saved Sally from those animals. We can't be more proud of you.

But we have to figure out what to do now." The fathers looked at each other and came to a decision.

"You are going to have to go away for a while, until things settle down some."

"How will you work the farm? If they do come, won't it look just as suspicious if I'm gone?" Daniel asked. "Besides, where am I'm going to go?"

"And he ain't going without me," interjected Amos.

The fathers looked at their sons in silence. Finally, Ezekiel McKetrick said, "There was a sergeant from the 1st North Carolina recruiting over at Pineville last week. He said the regiment saw some hard fighting up at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg this past season and they are looking to fill out their ranks.

They'll be going into winter quarters soon so it should be quiet. He's going to be there 'til the end of this week. You can sign up for six months and be back here in time for spring planting. Anybody who comes looking for you, we can say you two are off to Wilmington for schooling for the winter. Nobody would have anything to say about that."

The boys had been thinking about joining up anyway but could not bear to put their parents through any more worry. The idea of being back in the spring suited them fine.

Now the only problem was to get them to Pineville, about ten miles towards Plymouth, without getting caught and hung. They would have to go overland, at night, on foot, and they would have to leave in three hours when it was full dark. They would take the Spencers and Colts with them. If caught, they would be killed on the spot.

The men returned to the Parcher house where Sally was sleeping. Her mother, Mary, had taken the torn, bloody dress and burned it. The mothers had already started packing food and clothes for their sons.

"So, you know," said Carl McKetrick, seeing how far the preparations had advanced.

"Course we know. Those redlegs are going to be coming and these boys have got to be gone."

"But they may not figure out it was me," said Daniel. "Nobody else was on the road."

"That may be as is," said his father, "but they can follow wagon tracks. There aren't that many young men left in the county that could kill two grown men. And, besides, they won't be picky about who they string up. There will be a couple of Negroes thrown in for good measure. No, you two have to clear out tonight."

"But what about Sally? I've got to say goodbye to her."

"Less she knows about this, the better," answered Mary Parcher. "I'll let her know why you're gone in good time. Now get anything else you need."

When it was full dark, Amos and Daniel shouldered their satchels, tucked their hunting knives into their boots, and retrieved the weapons from under the dried tobacco leaves. Ezekiel Parcher took them outside. Their mothers had said their goodbyes in the house. Strong until now, neither felt they could bear the final parting. Parcher took out a pencil stub and a scrap of paper and wrote a quick note.

"Stick to the fields, don't go on the road, stop an hour before dawn and bed down in some woods. No fires, sleep in turns. Should take you two nights to get into Pineville. Once there, stay out of sight until you can find Henry Quarles. He's the local Confederate commissary and will know how to put you in touch with the army. Give him this note. All he has to know is that he's got two willing recruits who come with their own arms. He'll know enough not to question you too closely."

Carl McKetrick gave each boy ten Yankee dollars. "Don't go flashing this around. Use it only if your food runs out or you have to outfit yourselves. You boys are suspicious enough with the Spencers without having a wad of greenbacks.'

"Now, God speed. Be the men we raised you to be. You've already made us proud," Parcher said.

"God be with you and keep you both in His grace," McKetrick said. The fathers embraced their sons and watched until they disappeared into the night. They turned back to the house both silent but wondering if that was the last time they would ever see their sons.

#

"How's the leg holding up, Daniel?" They had been stumbling through thickets and swamps in the dark for three hours. Each time he fell, Daniel grunted or swore. "We can rest here a spell."

"No, goddammit," Daniel answered. "How far you think we've come? Are we even still heading in the right direction? At this rate, it will take more than two nights to get to Pineville."

They were soaking wet, scratched and bruised by bulling their way through the underbrush. They had both made the trip to Pineville hundreds of times but that was during the day, on the road. They had never paid much attention to the woods running on either side of the dirt track until now.

"Listen, Amos, let's do another couple of hours, then bed down." They could only manage a half hour when the fatigue, cold and hunger made them stop. They had some cold soup and hardtack, wrapped themselves in their blankets and were instantly asleep. It was noon before they awoke. They were horrifyingly close to the road which was active with traffic. They crept slowly into the thicket and waited for dark. They had only made three miles of the ten to Pineville.

After the second night of their struggle through the woods, the boys were fighting off panic. Their food was running out and they did not know where they were but were sure they were nowhere close to Pineville.

"We are never going to make it like this," Amos said through chattering teeth. The cool fall days did not warm them. All their blankets and clothes were soaked through. Facing the third night of dragging through the woods had convinced Amos a change in plans was needed. "Look, there's no moon and no traffic these last two nights. I say, we get on the road and make some progress. We can jump in the brush if we hear anyone coming. Otherwise, we'll never get there."

Daniel had not wanted to tell Amos but his leg wound had opened and was seeping blood.

"Alright, I think you are right. We will wait until full dark and no traffic for at least an hour before we get on the road."

The first two hours of their new plan went well. Their spirits were brightened by the improved progress and lack of any traffic. The eastern sky was just beginning to lighten and the boys were looking for a place to hide for the day.

"Hold it right there, you two." The commanding voice stopped them like running into a wall.

"What's your business?" Four horsemen, two from either side of the road emerged from the thickets.

"Well, speak up." Hammers were being pulled back. Men gathered behind the speechless boys.

"Hey, Ed, they've got Spencers. These must be the two all those Yankees are looking for."

"That so? Where did you get the rifles?"

Amos tried to talk but his mouth had gone dry. Daniel started. “We took them off two dead boys up the road some.”

“You two killed them?”

“No, sir. They were already dead. I don’t know what from.”

“So you are saying that two grown men, armed with the best rifles just suddenly pitched over and you two, out of the blue, happened along and snatched up these guns? That is your story?”

Daniel and Amos looked at each other and then the ground.

“Come on, Ed,” one of the other bushwhackers said. “Let’s deal with these two. That redleg patrol ought to be coming through here any time now.”

“Wait, are you boys Confederates?” asked Amos.

“That’s right – Edgar Swindell’s North Carolina Partisans. I supposed you boys were looking to sign up, right?” Ed replied derisively.

That got Daniel angry. “Damn right we were – are. Left home three nights ago heading to Pineville to enlist. We were going to look up Mr. Henry Quarles. We’ve got a note,” he finished, handing over the sodden, smudged scrap.

“Well, this thing can say just about anything, but nobody is fool enough to concoct a story like you two

without it being the truth. We'll finish our business here and then take you two on into Pineville."

"Ed, riders coming."

"Right, back to your positions. You two come with me." The men disappeared into the brush by the side of the road. Ten horsemen came at a slow trot. They were not spaced and were relaxed, probably thinking they were on safe ground. The first shot took down the lead horseman followed by a fusillade from both sides of the road. All ten men were down and not stirring. The rest of the men of the ambush came out quickly to check the dead Yankees, gather their weapons and anything else of value. All the horses were recovered.

"Mount up," commanded Ed. Amos and Daniel stood frozen at the scene of death. "If you boys still want to get to Pineville, you'd best come with us."

They were pulled up behind two riders and set off toward Pineville at the gallop. Amos was up on the second rider. "What's your name, boy?

"Amos Parcher. What outfit is this, again?"

"Edgar Swindell's Partisan Rangers. That was Swindell himself you were talking to. How well can you two ride?"

"Well enough, I suppose."

"That so? I reckon we'll see soon enough. If you can't stick it, then you might just find yourselves on foot by the side of the road, no horses, no rifles, neither."

“Don’t you worry ‘bout that. We’ll do just fine.”

By noon they were the newest recruits in the Confederate war effort.

# Chapter 5

## The Boneyard of Armies

May, 1864

"140th New York – skirmishers up!" Colonel George Ryan dismounted and strode to the head of his men just inside the tree line. This land had been fought over before, a year ago, as part of the Chancellorsville battle. The men of the 140th lying along the edge of the woods, lay among the skeletons of those who had come before them. Facing them was a half mile of Saunders' Field, slightly rising to meet another tree line, one not so sheltering. They had formed to the north of the Orange Turnpike after clawing and hacking their way through the brambles, tangles, mudholes and downed trees of the Wilderness for most of the day before. To march straight down the turnpike was certain death. Their mounded dead would clog the road preventing the rest of the army from passing to what would be their own destruction. The only possible approach was through the wall of scrub pine and thicket that was the Wilderness.

The 140th New York was a Zouave unit with baggy blue pantaloons made of kersey cloth, tied with leggings and puttees of leather. Their dark blue cut away jackets were

trimmed with red and had large red keys on the left breast. Red fezzes completed their uniforms. The regiment made a striking and powerful show on open parade ground or formed up on the battlefield but after clawing their way through the brambles and thickets of the Wilderness, their uniforms were nothing but muddy shreds. None of them knew where they were going or what lay ahead. They could see maybe ten feet through the undergrowth. After clawing their way through the dark, malevolent forest, Saunders' Field opened before them almost as the promised land. The light restored them, the air seemed thinner and more breathable. Units had become disconnected from each other. Their officers and sergeants had only an inkling of where they were and what their orientation was. The line of battle was more of a suggestion. Only by achieving the edge of the woods could their lines be reformed and some cohesion established. That's when the Rebel artillery opened on them. Small arms fire at one thousand yards was ineffective but Captain Charles Grandy's, of the Norfolk Light Artillery Blues, six-pounder smooth bore cannons firing from the rear of the Confederate line soon found their range, tearing holes in the 140th.

"Lie down, men, lie down," shouted the sergeants.

Ryan, knowing that he would need every man to make it across Saunders' Field and still have enough to carry the Rebel breastworks, sent his sergeants back to the rear area of the 140th to harvest whatever men they could find. "Cooks, teamsters, clerks - anyone breathing, get them up here, Sergeant." He did not have to go too far.

"You men," shouted the sergeant, "follow me."

"Where are we going?" asked Mathias Aiken.

"Colonel wants every able-bodied man up on the line."

"Look, Sergeant, I'm attached to the 13th Pennsylvania Reserve. They sent me over here to support the fighting. I've got no musket and I have to tend to my ambulance or sure as hell, those cavalry bastards are going to steal my horses."

"Can't be helped. You're going to pick up a musket soon enough and as for the ambulance, that'll be filled nicely as well. Now get moving."

It was just after noon and the May sun beat down on the opposing lines. Across the field was the 1st North Carolina of Ewell's 2nd Corps, lying atop their breastworks.

"Forward, men." The first line of Union skirmishers stepped from the trees and into the dazzling sunlight. Heat waves danced above the grass, making the crest of the gentle swale ahead of them pulse as if with a heartbeat of its own.

"Hold your fire, men. Let 'em come on a bit further." Captain Parker Lane of the 1st North Carolina steadied his men. Amos Parcher and Daniel McKetrick brought the hammers of their captured Springfields back to full cock, each picking out an approaching Yankee, steadying their aim on the gaudy Zouave blue jacket, trimmed in red. Ten yards out from the tree line, then twenty yards, fifty and the Union soldiers were to the swale. "Now, fire!"

Smoke and fire spewed forth from the tree line. A whirring, buzzing of a thousand hornets washed over the

skirmish line. A solid sheet of minie ball lead cut into the line, scything them down as if they were stalks of wheat. Men crumbled to the ground and moved no more. The rest of the 140th lying along the woods' edge looked on in horror as what had been fifty of their friends turned into bloody lumps. The smoke of the Rebels' first volley reached them when the order to advance was given.

"Well, at least now we know where they are," said Pvt. Carter Rutledge, grimly rising to his feet.

"At the double now, men. Stay low," shouted Colonel Ryan. "Have at them." A deep, throaty roar rose from the Union line as they emerged from the woods. They knew their best chance was to cross the killing field as quickly as possible. Led by their colors, the 140th left the shelter of the tree line at the double into the light and heat of Saunders' Field. The flag bearer was the first to fall but before the flag could hit the grass another man took it up. He was hit in the head flinging the flag into the air where it was caught by the man behind him. And, so it went: five men killed carrying the colors before they were half way across the field to reach the relative safety of the ditch in front of the swale. Retreat was as deadly as advancing. Heavy, sustained fire from the Rebel lines met them at every step. Men fell by the tens, some silently subsiding into the bloodied grass, others with wild screams, others still with mournful groans.

What had been a solid line of battle was torn apart. Forward momentum staggered as volley after volley scythed through them. Aiken's senses were sharpened and clear. He could feel each thud of his feet hitting the ground, the smooth motion of his joints, the steady in and out of his

breathing, the awkward weight of the Springfield in his hands. The cartridge and cap boxes which he also had to carry made him feel unbalanced. He did not know if his rifle was even loaded.

Around him men continued to fall. The sounds of the minie ball hits were unique: there was the soft moist thud of ball hitting gut; the sharp loud crack of ball hitting bone; the crackling pop of an exploding head; the ping-whistle piercing of a chest. The rounds passed by Aiken though he took no evasive moves - just running bent over as fast as he could. The edge of the woods seemed no nearer than when he started across the field. The smoky discharges from the Rebel muskets seemed as thick as ever.

However, I am still alive, he thought.

"Goddamit, men, give them a volley," shouted their colonel. The 140th stopped behind the swale and unloosed a ragged discharge which was still well-aimed and slowed some of the Rebels' fire. Aiken pulled the trigger but still was not sure if his rifle fired. The Zouaves rolled onto their backs in the shallow gully behind the swale midway through Saunders' Field. They rapidly reloaded as the volume of Rebel fire built but passed over them. To stand or kneel would have meant their certain destruction.

The Zouaves knew that this method of loading did not firmly tamp down the powder, lessening the force and therefore, the range and accuracy of their fire. But since their targets were less than fifty yards away, those were minor considerations. Whatever decrease in the accuracy of their fire, it was better than what dead men could

deliver, which is what they would be if they stood to re-load.

Aiken ripped open a cartridge with his teeth, tasting the sulfur-charcoal of the powder. He seated the ball and powder down the barrel with the ramrod. He stuck a cap on the nipple, pulled back the hammer to full. Smoke drifted thick over the Turnpike giving some concealment. Aiken looked toward the wood line and fired blindly into the trees. Smoke coated his mouth and throat making each breath thick and slow. Sooty smoke blew back and adhered to his sweaty face. Soon the faces of the 140th were as black as the slaves they were fighting to set free.

Battery D of the 1st New York Light artillery had been in reserve. They were ordered up the road to give some support to the bleeding infantry. Captain Shelton, the battery commander, could not believe it. “We won’t last a minute out there,” he remonstrated with the Colonel.

“My men are being slaughtered and without support. They’ll all be dead in another ten yards. Now get out there, Captain.”

Shelton would comply but could not risk all six of his guns: light Napoleon twelve-pounders.

“Hanover, you and Jensen take your guns down the road and get some lead on those Rebs. Take only canister.”

Sergeant Friederick Hanover of the 1st New York Light Artillery, thought first of his horses which he loved more than his guns, unusual in an artillerist. He came from Ithaca, New York, where he worked in a sawmill and did some

lumbering on the side. He became an expert at handling a horse team dragging one-hundred-foot long trunks out of the forests. This experience translated easily into maneuvering an artillery caisson. He had trained his team to back the cannon so that it could be brought into action more quickly, without first having to unlimber them. His gun crew lifted the carriage and the handspike pole fitted into the harness of the first pair's harness. By backing the horses and the men guiding the cannon, they could be in position and firing within a minute. The horses, protected by this approach, unhitched and moved to safety. Leaving them with the guns meant their slaughter.

The guns were already charged with canister shot. Hanover's gun went first. He moved forward on the road, some protection afforded by the swale. As soon as he had a clear shot, he let loose with the canister, ripping through the 1st North Carolina just to the right of the road. The Rebels had entrenched on the back side of the rise to afford them some protection from Yankee snipers, but to have clear fields of fire, they had to move forward and lie on top of the rise. The first canister round swept clean fifteen yards of the Rebel firing line. As soon as Hanover's horses had cleared the road, Jensen had his gun up and firing in less than a minute. He placed his round next to Hanover's at which point Hanover's gun was firing its second round to the south of the Orange Turnpike striking the 21st Virginia as well as some of the 1st North Carolina. The Rebels were forced back into their trenches.

Each of the twelve-pounders had a six-horse team, crewed, ideally, by eight men. Hanover's team was down to

four men. With each shot, the bore was sponged out with water, cooling and cleaning the bore, extinguishing any remnant embers while also clearing the vent. The vent was blocked by the captain of the piece's thumb, covered with a thick leather patch, to deprive the bore of oxygen. All this was necessary to prevent premature ignition of the new round's powder. Each canister round consisted of a thin metal can containing twenty-seven cast-iron shot. This was nailed to a wooden support called a sabot which had a grooved base to which the paper bag containing the powder was tied. The shell and powder were then rammed down the barrel of the cannon. The end of the bag was pricked by the vent pick, jammed down the vent hole to open the powder bag. The friction primer attached to the lanyard was placed in the vent hole above the loose powder of the round. When the order to fire was given, the lanyard was yanked out, sparks from the friction primer ignited the powder and the round was on the way. The explosive force of the round exiting the muzzle opened the canister, splaying the shot in front of the battery. The most lethal range was about five hundred yards.

Hanover's crew, even diminished, could sustain a well-aimed rate of fire of one round in less than two minutes.

Colonel Ryan saw the effect of the canister and quickly was up. "Forward, men, they're back in their holes." The ragged remains, diminished by a quarter, of the 140th New York rose from behind the swale and covered the remaining hundred yards before the Rebels could organize another volley. Aiken was up and running, too. He ran by the wounded, the dying, the dead without heed. He ran bent

over, straightening only to fire into the Rebel trenches. With a renewed roar, the 140th gained the small crest before the trenches where their flag, shot through and bloodied, was planted. Those that still had rounds fired them point blank into the upturned faces of the North Carolinians then plunged with their bayonets.

The trenches were not deep or narrow, depending on the log and dirt battlements for protection. Once over these, the 140th had room for clubbed muskets, bayonets and sabers. Amos Parcher sidestepped a bayonet thrust, grabbed the hot barrel and pulled the Yankee off the embankment and onto his knees where Daniel McKetrick finished him with his bayonet through the back. Insane screaming and curses flew back and forth, replacing the pounding explosions of the artillery. The only firing was from officers' pistols, six-shot Colts. Rebel and Yankee clutched and clawed, digging fingers into faces, gouging eyes, smashing teeth, choking off life. Men slipped in the bloody mud, dropping to the bottom of the trench, their faces obliterated by the trampling boots of their fellows.

The 140th had gained the Rebel trenches but held only about fifty yards just north of the Orange Turnpike. The line further to the north was still held by the 1st and 3rd North Carolina with the 10th Virginia beyond them and they were all coming. The New Yorkers would have to disengage and retreat or be killed in place. Aiken swung wildly with his musket, smashing the butt into the back of a Rebel's head and was rewarded with wet crunch. The man collapsed into the bottom of the trench. A minie ball ripped across Aiken's

back, spinning him around so that he faced down the length of the ditch.

There he could see only oncoming Rebels from the 3rd North Carolina. The high, nerve-rending scream of the Rebel yell shook him badly. He thought he was dead. His rifle was empty. He had no time to reload and, even if he could, he had no idea where his cartridge case was. He knelt on the chest of a dead Rebel and pointed his bayonet at the leading North Carolinian who at that moment was leveling his rifle at Aiken's head.

Another shout rose from Saunders' Field as the follow-on attack of the 146th New York crossed the bloody field. Their fire ripped into the Rebels, dropping the man who had been seconds away from killing Aiken. The Rebels turned to face the 146th as they crested the battlements. The Yankees threw themselves on the upraised bayonets. Some were tossed up and over the trenches like hay on pitchforks. The Union men were only half of they had been when they left the trees, fifteen minutes before. The shock of their volley only stunned the Rebels and now the Carolinians were pressing them fiercely. Their rifles were charged, the men who had been pushed out of the trenches were coming back. Shelton's guns were still firing, striking friend and foe alike. The Yankees were now faced with renewed attacks from the front, side and their own cannon from behind.

The supporting regiments, the 1st US Regulars and two Pennsylvania regiments that were to protect their flank, had been cut down as they crossed the field and melted into the ground before the breastworks. Still the New Yorkers held the fifty yards of trench for another thirty

minutes of brutal hand-to-hand fighting. There was room for the Zouaves to form only a five-man front facing down the trench. They were well drilled. The front rank fired while the second rank thrust over them with their bayonets and the third rank fired as they recovered. By then, the front rank had reloaded. Slowly, they advanced down the trench but the Confederate numbers were too great. The New Yorkers were a spent force and had to pull back across Saunders' Field. Aiken rolled over the embankment and scuttled out into the open field. He had lost his rifle along with the blood lust of the fight. Now he saw ahead of him only a gore-matted field of grass, littered with the dead and wounded of his adopted regiment. He began to gather up as many as he could. Shelton's canister kept the Rebels in their trenches, suppressing their fire. The men of the 146th fell back as well. The brave Zouave regiments which had advanced out of the woods now stumbled back, bloodied, dragging their wounded and dead with them. They made it back to the swale and fell to the ground. Their flag, now only a fluttering rag was stuck deep in the blood-soaked ground.

The Carolinians gave out a triumphant shout and turned their attention to Shelton's guns on the turnpike. Heavy rifle fire began to thud and ping off the guns and the limbers. Men from the 1st North Carolina felt they had a score to settle with Shelton's cannon. With the Yankee assault dealt with for now, the Rebels came storming over their battlements and down the slope to capture the guns. Hanover and Jensen's crews got off one more round each, tearing holes in the Rebel attack. There was no retreat with the guns. The gunners knew their choice was to abandon

their guns or die beside them. The horses were now dead or wounded. The screams of the gutted horses rose above the battle din.

Hanover and Jensen and the surviving men of their crews picked up their muskets, ramrods or worm poles to defend their guns. Of the twelve gunners that had come out, only four were not wounded, two were dead.

The men of the 1st North Carolina fired almost as soon as they left their trenches, their rounds passing harmlessly over the crouched gunners. Parcher and McKetrick fired, then with a hoarse scream ran down the Turnpike. Hanover and his men returned fire and then braced themselves for the onslaught. The Rebels were on them, stabbing with bayonets, clubbing with muskets. The gunners parried with their own muskets but found the worm poles and ramrods most effective at fending off the attackers. But this was going to end only one way for the Yankees. The Rebels climbed on top of the cannon waving their flag triumphantly. They had not remembered in time the bloodied but still effective remnants of the 140th and 146th New York lying in the ditch behind the swale.

"Give them a volley, men," a Union sergeant screamed. The rounds swept over the cannon and only the Rebels who had fallen under the carriages survived. Smoke obscured the source of the fire from the Carolinians.

The Yankees came at them with vengeance. The Rebels had no choice but to surrender, Parcher and McKetrick among them. The guns were again in Union hands. Hanover lay under the Confederate dead beneath his cannon.

Jensen was dead, as was the rest of his crew. He struggled out from under his gun and began to reload, pressing into service any infantryman he could get his hands on. Once the smoke had cleared and the Rebel line saw what had happened at the cannon, more men came streaming over their battlements. The two sides collided at the cannon. More joined from either side of Saunders' Field. The bloody melee surged back and forth. In the confusion, McKetrick and Parcher escaped their captors. They were unarmed but also uninjured. Kneeling in the thick grass along the road, they caught their breath.

"God, almighty, Daniel, what do we do now?"

Stray rounds clipped the grasses and whirred by their ears. "Can't stay here, can't just sashay on up the road, neither," he said.

Sinking farther down into the grass, they watched the swirling slaughter around Shelton's guns. The dead and wounded of both sides intermingled and piled one on top of the other. Those not dead but buried in the pile still clutched and stabbed at their enemies. The men from the 140th, 146th and some US Regulars streamed in along the gully behind the swale to join in the fight for the cannon. Men from the 1st and 3rd North Carolina came down the road screaming their Rebel yell and fell into the fray. Parcher and McKetrick watched the bestial fight from their hiding place in the tall grass. With the arrival of more Yankees, the North Carolinians began to fall back. The two boys saw their chance and bolted out of the grass and onto the road. They picked up Springfields as they ran back to their entrenchments. Hanover was able to get one more

round of canister discharged into the fleeing Rebels. Then, exhausted, he collapsed by the cannon wheel.

This time the victory shout belonged to the Yankees. They pursued the retreating Rebels up the road and reclaimed the trenches lost thirty minutes and four hundred men before. The two regiments, the 1st North Carolina and the 140th New York, lay bloodied and exhausted, eyeing each other under a canopy of trees, separated by twenty yards of contested ground, occupied now by the dead and dying of both sides.

It was only two hours ago that the 140th New York had left the woods and started across Saunders' Field. There were more than one thousand dead Yankees on that field, some three hundred Rebels. Aiken retrieved his ambulance. His horses were still hitched to the wagon. All the would-be horse thieves Aiken had worried about evidently had been pressed into the attack as well. He moved his ambulance down the Orange Turnpike to the verge of the woods. There were still some wounded he could reach behind the swale.

Two Rebel sharpshooters armed with Enfield rifles were positioned in the trees above the new Rebel line. Once they saw him retrieve a wounded Rebel from the cannons, they held their fire. The sharpshooters did not give the same quarter to other Union targets up to one hundred yards away.

Every discharge from their rifles claimed a Union target, often head shots, officers mainly. Aiken made two runs back to the field hospital and was satisfied there were no

more easy pickings on the Union side of the field. He hoped his private truce with the snipers in the trees would hold. He started across the field, hands held out to the side showing he had no weapons. He regained the trench at the top of the field with the 140th. Aiken crawled up and down the trench doing what he could for the wounded there. To the west, beyond a bend in the trench, a faint moaning arose. He had no doubt there were wounded down the line that he could not reach. He ministered to the ones in front of him. The moaning grew in volume, then turned to shouts and then screams. Firing began and rounds whirled overhead. Smoke drifted through the thicket. "My God, the woods have caught fire," someone shouted. Finally, the crackling fire, flame leaping into the overarching branches, made its way into the horrified men. Aiken wiped the soot and blood from his eyes. Amongst the flames, something caught his eye. He had a hard time focusing and then a harder time understanding what it was he saw. He then realized that a skull left from the Chancellorsville's fighting the year before was on fire. Flames shot out from the skull's eye sockets, nasal passage and between the blackening teeth. Horrified, he rolled to his left, over an exposed skeleton from last year's fight. A sharp pain like a bayonet sticking in his side caused him to look around. He plucked a broken rib from his side. Looking amongst the forest floor detritus, he saw that he was lying amidst the Hooker's skeleton army: soldiers killed on the same malevolent ground that seemed to be trying to claim him, left for a year undisturbed until now, to be consumed by fire.

The unmistakable stench of burning flesh reached the trenches. Men did not dare move due to the building

volume of rounds buzzing just above their heads. What the hell are they firing at, thought Aiken. The wounded men in the space between the lines knew what lay in store for them. Their pleas, cries for help, for their mothers, for God's mercy lifted above the growing roar of the oncoming fire. Pitiful attempts at crawling away accomplished little. Their comrades on both sides could only watch as those who still had use of their hands grasped their muskets, moved them under their chins and fired. Others used their knives. Some lying side by side fired into each other – a better death than by fire.

"God dammit, Amos Parcher. Keep your fool head down," shouted Daniel.

The screams were moving towards them as the fires swept down between the lines, consuming the wounded of both sides. The putrid smoke thickened, burning their eyes and sickening the two Rebel soldiers of the 1st North Carolina infantry. Cries for help from further up the line had quieted but the cartridges continued to cook off as the wounded, both Confederate and Union, were slowly burned alive. Daniel McKetrick kept a restraining hand on his friend's shoulder to prevent him from leaping over their hastily erected entrenchments. Musket fire buzzed and hissed over their breastworks inches above their heads.

"See there? Those godless Yanks are still shooting at them, the gutless sons of bitches," said McKetrick.

"I got to do something, Daniel." Parcher peered over the top log of his trench. He saw no Yankees firing. If

anything, they were watching the same scene. The horror was too much for Parcher.

"You, Yank. Don't you shoot me. I'm gonna stand up now, unarmed." He slowly rose from behind his earthworks, arms raised.

"That's mighty obliging of that Reb," said Private Rutledge of the 140th New York. "I ain't got a clear shot at any of them since we been in these god-cursed woods." He raised his Springfield and brought the hammer back to full cock. He felt a restraining hand on his arm. "Dammit, Aiken, let me be."

"Put it down, Carter, I'm going out, too. Hey, Reb, don't you shoot me neither. I'm coming out."

The two Americans rose to their full heights, staring across the twenty body-strewn yards of writhing wounded that separated their lines. Another cartridge box exploded, ending one more man's agony. Parcher and Aiken both involuntarily ducked down at the all too familiar sound of the gunfire. But they advanced together onto the bloody ground. The smoke, the cries for help, for God, for death, rose with the stench of burning skin, hair, muscle to be trapped beneath the continuous roof of leaf and limb. They saw only ten feet down the lines. The oncoming flames filled the smoke with glowing hellish light pierced with bright flashes of the exploding ammunition, warning of time running out. There was no firing from either side. Heads appeared above the opposing breastworks, watching the two soldiers.

The first man they came to was a Union soldier shot in the stomach. He was curled, clutching his wound, blood and intestines sliding out between his fingers. Parcher got him under the legs and hips, Aiken under the arms. Moist, gurgling groans were all the soldier could muster. At first, they pulled him towards their respective lines but being closer to the Union side and time being of the essence, that was the way they went. Only when Parcher realized he was behind enemy lines did the thought of capture occur to him. Willing hands took the wounded man. The Rebels watched carefully, ready to spring to Parcher's rescue, but none was needed.

Parcher and Aiken returned over the trench wall, followed by ten Yankees. An equal number of Rebels joined them in the evacuation of their wounded comrades just ahead of the flames. Men from North Carolina and New York who an hour before had battled each other without quarter to an exhausted standstill within the smothering thickets and trees of the Wilderness now gathered their helpless fellow soldiers and carried them to the nearest safety without regard to their uniforms. The exploding cartridges randomly took flight among the rescuers, wounding them in turn. Still, they worked, until the reeking, choking smoke enveloped the flaming trenches, driving their comrades back to their secondary lines, leaving at least two hundred, mainly Union, men burning to death just yards from their lines.

Reb and Yank were shocked into a truce of sorts. Too spent to continue the fight, too appalled by what they had done, the soldiers lay in their trenches staring blankly at the

bloody walls. The fires had burned past the Rebels and Yankees now safely behind their secondary earthworks. The stinking smoke had filtered up through the overarching trees and the cries of the unrescued had stilled. In the silence that filled the woods after the inferno had roared by him, Parcher heard the call of whippoorwills in the branches overhead which seemed to him to jeer at the insane butchery they had witnessed below them. He heard something else: the rasp of ramrods forcing powder and ball down the throats of muskets.

# Chapter 12

## The Raid

Winter-Spring, 1864

"Sergeant Davis, come with me," Lieutenant Stevens, his platoon leader, commanded. Ben had been settled around his cook fire with the rest of his squad, near their horses. Each man was an expert at riding and caring for his own horse and tack. They were frequently picked for reconnaissance missions. Ben and his men liked nothing better than to be out on their own, picking up information, the odd straggler or spooking the Rebel outposts with their sudden and loud raids. So, he was not surprised with Lieutenant Stevens' preemptory command. They returned to Major Patton's tent. Maps were open on his camp desk.

"Ah, Sergeant, good. Have a seat. Some coffee?" The Major had come up through the ranks himself and was surprisingly informal.

"Yes, thank you, sir," Davis replied and poured himself a cup before sitting.

"Now," Patton began, "since you were last here, Lieutenant Stevens and I have been working on a few things. Mainly, how best to use you and your men. He tells

me that your squad is ready for a little action." Davis nodded. "Good. Come here and tell us what you think.

Davis rose and positioned himself next to the map table. It detailed a circle about ten miles wide, centered on Verdiersville, the railhead and the river, north to the fords, as far as Clark's mountain. Confederate camps were indicated, their units and approximate strengths. The countryside along the river and the rail lines was heavily wooded and nearly trackless. The road leading from the railhead paralleling the river was marked as well. Davis knew the area well, having been the source for most of the information on the map.

"Our plan," the Major continued, "is for you and your men to cross the river into the woods and raid up and down their line, gather up what prisoners you can but mainly just make yourselves pains in their backsides. We want you to start with your plan to blow up a train at Verdiersville, then the rest is up to you. You are to operate independently, coming back into camp only to drop off prisoners, information, and resupply. Other than that, we don't need to hear from you. You will be in uniform so the Rebs can't claim you are spies and just shoot you all.

"We are choosing you to lead this because we know you are trustworthy and are not going to get carried away. This is legitimate scouting, accomplishing honorable military goals. Any thoughts?"

Ben had already run the raid on the rail line in his mind through all possible scenarios and was only hoping to be given permission to carry it out.

"Thank you, sir. I have a good idea about what you would have us do and I have come up with a workable plan to attack the railhead. Actually, Lieutenant Stevens and I have worked out all but the last details." He moved closer to the map to begin explaining when Major Patton stopped him.

"That won't be necessary, Sergeant. I have no doubt that your plan is sound. You are free to proceed as you both see fit. That is all."

Ben could not believe his luck. These were the best possible orders he could have been given. To have Stevens' and Patton's backing and confidence was more than he had hoped for. He practically ran back to his squad. They looked up at his face and knew something was up.

"We have new orders," he began. "We are to do some independent raiding on the Rebs around Verdiersville. We get to pick our targets, decide how and what to attack, and only report back here when we need supplies. The Lieutenant and Major are leaving it all up to us."

He men became as excited as he was.

"When do we start?" asked Mat Tolland, his second in command.

"We'll use the next couple of days to gather supplies. We're going to be travelling light -- just ammunition, dynamite, food and bedrolls. I think our own mounts and maybe two extras for packing supplies and replacement. Our first job will be the railhead and as much track as we can blow up. After that, we'll hit it every now and then

while we also go after supply trains, depots, anything we can reach.

"These are going to be quick in-and-out strikes, all times of day and night, scattered around so that we get them thinking there are a bunch of raiding parties, not just us. They will expect us to cross and re-cross the river so, at least to start, they'll keep what cavalry they have at the fords and narrows. More important than the supplies will be their horses. Now this is the hard part. We won't be able to take the horses back across the river, can't keep them with us. We can run them off some to delay them coming after us but the only practical answer is to shoot them."

As cavalrymen the thought of shooting horses in cold blood was harder for them than killing their riders. Davis saw mounting opposition to this plan. The raids were exactly why they had enlisted in the cavalry, but to shoot the horses was going to be hard for them. Ben understood as he thought of shooting Sam, his horse from home, but the success of the raids depended on them being able to evade capture and crippling their capability to pursue them was essential.

"I don't know about that," said Tolland, Davis' first squad leader. "There really is no other way?"

"Look," Ben answered, "we are going to stay in the woods on their side of the river. Keeping our own horses quiet and concealed will be hard enough. They are the biggest risk to us and also the most important part of the plan. The Rebs have to think that we cross back over the river after each raid so they won't be looking for us, at least

not right away. Tolland and I will sneak over there and see if we can find a couple of spots in the woods to camp out. Then all of us will need to know those woods like they were our own back home. We can't leave a trail so each of us will have to move in and out of the woods by ones and twos, join up at a few different spots and lay low in between raids. It won't be easy or as nice as we've got it now but there will be plenty of action."

Shooting the horses, Ben saw, was still a sticking point, but he sensed that they would come around after a few raids. He still had to convince Tolland and he planned to work on him while they scouted out a few campsites. Davis also tried to come up with an alternative to shooting the captured horses. The quickest way to degrade JEB Stuart's cavalry was to deprive him of experienced riders and mounts. Most of the acceptable horses in Northern Virginia were already used up. Getting more from further south was impossible. Everyone needed horses and only the Union had so many that they did not need to keep the captured ones. Guarding the Union remudas fell to only the most trusted of the Black troops. So far, the 130th USCI had not lost a one.

Davis and Tolland waited until full dark and then led their horses over the frozen Rapidan. They had taken the precaution to wrap the hooves in burlap to improve traction and deaden noise. The first crossing was without incident. They let the horses find the way into the woods being whipped by wet branches all the way, until they were scratched and soaked.

"Hold up here," said Ben. Tolland pulled alongside. "Over there, does that look like the brush is thinner?"

"Mighty wishful thinking," answered Tolland. They dismounted and after five minutes found themselves in a depression about thirty yards wide and overhung with branches. The deepest part trapped enough water to take care of the horses at least. Along the sides was enough dry ground to allow the men to stay at least a little dry. Ben left Sam with Tolland and scrambled to the lip. Five feet further into the trees and he could not see any obvious signs of the depression. He estimated that they were within two miles of the railhead at Verdiersburg. He returned to the depression.

"Not bad for a first time looking. Let's see what the day brings."

They found a spot out of the water to hobble the horses and waited for dawn. With first light, they both climbed to the rim and walked the circumference. Satisfied that the concealment was secure enough for all but the most prying of eyes, they settled against the bank for some sleep. They spent the following day in the depression and returned to their camp to report to Major Patton.

"You men have done well," the Major congratulated them. "I can see why Lieutenant Stevens recommended you. Alright, there's a new moon in two nights. You'll take your squad over then. I don't expect to hear from you for a while but raise all the hell you can. Dismissed."

Davis and Tolland went over the plan with the rest of the men. Each man was an expert with the Spencer rifles

they would be carrying. Their mounts were healthy and conditioned for the hard service they were expected to see in the coming weeks. For the raid on Verdiersburg they would carry only food enough for four days, extra ammunition and a case of dynamite. In two days, they were ready and crossed over the Rapidan at midnight. They easily found the depression and settled in.

"You all know the plan," Davis began, "but it can't hurt to go over it one more time. We will split up into two groups, each with dynamite. My group will create a diversion down the tracks by attacking the incoming train. When you hear the explosions, Tolland's group will hit the yard, blowing up as much of the rails and particularly, the switching stations. After the train is taken care of, we'll ride down to the yard and join with Tolland. We'll see what else we can do, then split up into small groups and make our way back here. We've got to be quick and create enough confusion that they won't come after us.

"Any questions?"

There were none. The night of the raid was spent going over their rifles, ammunition, paring down as much equipment as they could to travel light and fast. Davis led his group out first. He had scouted out a sharp bend about half a mile from the yard where the train would be slowed down. He positioned his men on either side of the tracks in the trees.

The sharp, piercing whistle of the train alerted them. As expected, the train slowed to near walking speed.

"Now, boys, at them!" he shouted. Davis carried the ten sticks of dynamite, lighting the fuse, steering Sam with his knees. The four other squad members poured round after round into the engine and picked off guards riding on top of the few cars it pulled. Ducking low, watching the ever-shortening fuses, Davis maneuvered Sam alongside the engine, waiting until the last inch of fuse to hurl it into the cab. He pulled sharply on the reins and veered off. The blast nearly blew him out of the saddle and caused Sam to stumble. His men kept up a steady fire on the blazing train until they all peeled off and entered the trees again. There was no pursuit but they tarried only moments to take in the destruction they had caused. Flames spouted from the ruined engine, lighting up the tree line. Men staggered out of the boxcars, some on fire, collapsing on the ground. Secondary explosions erupted along the length of the train. All of the cars lay on their sides, blocking the tracks for two hundred yards.

The explosion from Tolland's group at the switching yard alerted Davis that there was still more work to be done. His group raced along the tracks, their Spencers at the ready to help Tolland any way they could. The shacks comprising the small depot at the yard contained food, clothes, boots and gun powder. Davis saw the dismounted men going from shack to shack, tossing torches. Davis kept his men mounted and formed a security perimeter while Tolland's group completed their destruction. The entire raid lasted ten minutes. They regrouped to be sure that all of the raiding party was accounted for, then split up to seep like water spilled on sand, back to their camp in the woods.

Davis posted two mounted men at the tree line to warn of any search party coming from the railhead. It was from the direction of the river that the danger came. Alerted by the flames and explosions, some Rebel cavalry came riding hard from the fords. The Union watchers let them pass and then returned to their makeshift camp.

"We've some Reb riders coming back from the river to see what happened," they reported to Davis.

"How many?"

"At least ten or twelve, maybe more."

"Did they seem to be looking for anything or just riding to the railhead?"

"Pretty much just riding hell bent towards the flames and all."

Davis consulted with Tolland. "What say we stay in the woods and come on them from the tree line? They will be mainly concerned with the train and wounded. We could ride through them and be gone again before they knew what the hell was going on."

"I'd say you are pushing our luck," Tolland answered. "We don't know for sure how many there are, if more riders or infantry have come up. But you can be sure that they would love to have a shot at us. And even though they didn't come after us so far, we are going to be the prize they want. We hit them twice and there won't be any way they are going to stop looking for us until we're dead."

"You are right but it is just that -- they would never expect us to hit them again. Two strikes so close together and they would have to think they are dealing with a big force of cavalry. It'll make them look to the roads, open country rather than the woods. Tell you what, we'll just creep along the tree line and take a look. If it looks like too big a chaw for us, we'll slink away."

"Now, the goal of this little excursion is not to get us killed the very first night, right?"

"Come on. We'll be quiet as can be."

Tolland was not convinced but agreed to the plan.

The squad rode through the trees and brush until the flames were beginning to light up the faces of the men and horses. They dismounted and went the rest of the way on foot, patting their horses' snouts to keep them calm. Instinctively, they formed a skirmish line just inside the trees. As Davis expected, all the attention of the Rebs was directed at the ruined train and railhead. Their cavalry had dismounted to assist with the wounded and try to put out the flames. Davis and Tolland exchanged glances. They signaled the squad to remount and draw their Spencers.

Davis bellowed once again, "At them, boys," and as one, the troopers erupted from the tree line. They were deadly accurate with their Spencers, bringing down both men and horses as they sped into the confused Rebels. Their faces were glowing red from the fires and contorted with screaming as they pumped round after round into the near helpless Rebels. They wheeled their horses and slammed another magazine of seven bullets into their

rifles, returning through the fire and melee without pause. Scattered shots followed them back into the sheltering trees. The Rebel losses in experienced cavalry and their mounts from this raid alone, were irreplaceable.

Davis wheeled to face the carnage while the rest of his squad made their way back to their camp. Once he was satisfied that there would be no pursuit this time, he found he was suddenly exhausted. He leaned over Sam's neck and patted her shoulder. His hand came back bloodied. He sprang from her back and searched for the wound in the light of the railhead fires. One of the Rebel bullets had gouged out a furrow in her muscle but not deeply. He led her back to the camp, using his shirt to cover the wound. Once he was sure Sam's wound was slight, Davis went around the small camp to assess his men and their mounts. Remarkably, even though they had made two charges against greatly superior numbers, Sam's wound was the only one the squad sustained. Even Tolland was satisfied with the outcome and did not doubt Davis again.

They spent two days in their camp during which time Davis sent out two men at a time to keep an eye on the Rebels. It was clear that they were still recovering from the raid and had pulled back from the river. They did not patrol into the woods, thinking that the Yankees had fully withdrawn across the river to their camps. This suited Davis. His own patrolling had found that supplies from further south of the ambush site were beginning to pile up. The Rebels were trying to gather wagons and teams to move the goods up beyond the ruined rail line at Verdiersville. Tolland wanted to hit the individual wagons

but Davis convinced him to continue raiding down the rail line, destroying more supplies at once. He gathered the men to plan their next strike. It was an hour before full dark.

"It looks like there is a good chance of hitting them again about five miles down the line," said Davis, opening the strategy meeting. The men were elated by their success, which came at no real cost to them, and were eager to have at the Rebs again.

"But we've used up all our dynamite," Tolland said.

"I know, but they have pulled back from the river so it should not be too much trouble to go back for more. Risson, you and Walters go on back and bring along as much dynamite as you can get. More ammunition as well. Report to Lieutenant Stevens and see if he has any new orders. Then come on back. Leave tonight and be back by tomorrow night. Meanwhile, I think we'll move to a new site, closer to the next target. We'll leave someone here to guide you to the new spot. Now, get going and we'll see you tomorrow night." The two troopers took only their rifles, and the extra horse to carry the supplies. They slipped away towards the Germanna ford. Tolland and Davis then went back into the woods paralleling the railroad to find their next base of operations. There was still no sign that the Rebs had any idea they were still in their neighborhood. Davis rode the other spare horse to give Sam time to recover.

"Look over there, through the trees," said Tolland. At first Davis did not see anything but Tolland led him to another depression, smaller than the first but closer to the

edge of the woods. They had come three miles. There were many streams that ran through the Wilderness and this one was flowing fast enough over rocks that it was not frozen. It was also noisy enough to cover whatever sounds the squad would make. The two men scouted a bit further but found nothing else that suited their needs.

"I think you're right," said Davis to Tolland. "This looks good. Bring the rest of the squad back here. Then we can scout out along the tracks and get some rest."

The following night, Davis returned to the original camp site and brought Risson, Walters and the pack horse carrying the dynamite, ammunition and sets of dry clothes for the squad. They had more than twice the amount of dynamite as before.

"We are going to raise some hell with this," Davis said, grinning broadly. Their new camp was close enough to the rail line that they could reconnoiter on foot, reducing the chance of discovery. They found that the new supplies remained in the box cars and the locomotive had returned down the line. The number of guards had increased so that there looked to be more than a hundred infantry as well as a troop of twenty cavalry. The squad took turns watching the comings and goings of the wagons, offloading the box cars. It was clear this was going to be a much more formidable force to deal with.

"Look, Davis," Tolland said, "it's crazy for just the ten of us to attack them. Let's send for the rest of the company. Then we'd have a chance. With just us, there's no way we

can do much more than get ourselves killed or captured. They're looking for trouble now."

"But they still don't know we are here or how many of us there might be. Our greatest advantage is our small size and quickness. There is no way a company of cavalry can move through these woods without getting discovered before they get close enough to do anything. With the dynamite and more bullets, we can hit them again and be gone. A second raid like that and they'll have no idea what is going on. They've got to think that we are a much bigger force and will be looking for us out in the open. We'll think on it some more. They aren't going anywhere and I think we can do some real serious damage here."

Tolland remained unconvinced despite their initial success. He thought Davis was just getting too full of himself and was willing to take unreasonable risks with their lives. But he kept his thoughts to himself. Another day of observing the activity around the supply train gave Davis the plan he needed. He gathered his squad together at their camp.

"This is what I'm thinking," he began. "The train stretches about half a mile and even though the guards outnumber us…"

"By a lot," interjected Tolland.

"Yes, by more than ten to one counting their cavalry," continued Davis. "They are scattered along the length of the train. The cavalry is patrolling on the other side of the tracks and down the line beyond Verdiersville. Their horses are in a remuda for safe keeping at night. So, here's what I

came up with. We line up inside the trees along the train, centered on their remuda. We all will have five sticks of dynamite and a full load for the rifles. I figure there will be maybe twenty guards, facing the trees, along the line we want to attack. Each man picks out the two guards facing him. I will bring down the two facing me which will be your signal to take out your guards. After that, we come out of the trees riding right at the box cars with the fuses lit. They are cut to one minute so don't saunter out there. We ride hellbent for leather, toss the sticks into as many cars as we can get to without blowing ourselves up, then back to the trees. I'm going to ride straight to the remuda with my sticks and toss them into the middle of the horses and then join you all back in the woods." Davis felt he had to be the one to kill the horses, knowing the degree of revulsion felt by his men about the killing.

"Any questions?"

"What's to keep their cavalry from catching us out of the woods?" Tolland asked. More than a few of the men had the same question in their minds.

"We've got to be fast and coordinated. Each step: shooting your guards, lighting the dynamite, hitting the cars have all got to be at the same time. There can't be any hanging back, any hesitation. We've got to hit them all together and get out of there."

The most complicated part of the operation was lighting the fuses while on horseback, on the move. They practiced during the day using their boxes of Lucifer matches they all carried. The matches were reliable if kept

dry and lit with one stroke against the igniter strip. The fuses of the five sticks each man carried lit with a single match. Seeing that this part of the plan was practical, even Tolland began to feel confident. They waited for night, hoping for clear weather.

They walked their horses to their spots along the tree line then remounted. Their Spencers were slung over their shoulders, the dynamite sticks tied in loose bundles stuck inside their shirts. Each man had two match sticks between their teeth and held the box in their left hand. The Rebel cookfires backlit the box cars and the guards. They mounted the horses.

Davis brought his rifle to his shoulder, knowing the rest of the squad was doing the same. He sighted on the chest of his first guard and squeezed off a round. He brought down his next guard, as the rest of the squad killed their men. He gripped the dynamite with his left hand, struck his match with his right and ignited the fuses. With a shout, he drove Sam forward towards the cars and the remuda beyond. There were guards inside the cars as well. They fired a volley at the approaching horsemen, knocking two from their saddles. The surviving eight launched their dynamite into cars as they sped past. Each car got at least one stick.

Davis saw his two men go down but concentrated on the remuda. He had farther to go, his fuses more than half way gone before he cleared the train. Twenty yards ahead was the remuda. He spurred his horse to greater speed. He had to throw the sticks when he was ten feet away and pulled hard to the left. The stick fell among the horses

causing horrible damage. He wheeled Sam hard to the right, ducking low along her neck. The Confederate soldiers were regrouping and firing with accuracy. Another man went down. Davis and the rest of his squad returned fire with their Colt revolvers, all the while trying to escape from the light of the blazing boxcars. Not all of the Rebel cavalry had been neutralized. From out of the dark came thudding hoofbeats and muzzle flashes. Rounds began to whirr around the fleeing Union horsemen. Davis' raiders were now reduced to seven separated, desperate men trying to survive the hot pursuit of a vengeful enemy who wanted them dead.

Davis and one other man, named Abrams, slowed down once they were out of the light of the fires, turning to face the now slowed Rebel pursuit since their quarry had disappeared.

"Where do you think the rest of the boys are?" he asked Davis. "I saw Quince and Lafferty go down in the field, but I don't know if any of the others got away. Have you seen Tolland?"

Davis brought his Spencer up to his shoulder and chambered a round. The Rebels were beginning to mill around the burning boxcars, trying to salvage something from the flames. Davis picked out a rider wearing a plumed slouch hat and shot him from his saddle.

"No," Davis answered, drawing a bead on another cavalryman who was trying to control his mount. He squeezed off a shot. The man flung his arms backward in the air and landed heavily in the dirt. Davis then killed his

horse. “Get back to the trees and see if anyone else is there. I’ll hold them off here for a little while longer.” Abrams did not need any coaxing and reined his horse towards the woods.

Two Rebels had fixed on Davis’ location and spurred their mounts into a gallop. They fired their revolvers, getting closer to him with each round.

“Time to go, girl,” said Davis and jerked the reins hard to the right, away from the tree line. The Rebels followed but they had expended their six shots. While they were reloading and before more of their compatriots could join the pursuit, Davis wheeled once again, steering her with his knees and with his Spencer charged at them, firing round after round. They retreated back to the shelter of a ragged skirmish line formed by the remnants of the train guards.

“Well, that’s about all we can do for now,” Davis thought. He loaded another magazine into his rifle and turned once again for the trees. He remained in the dark. The Rebels’ night vision was ruined by the flaring of the train fire, making him invisible to them. Once the Yankee soldiers had stopped firing, the Rebels had no idea where they were, where they would hit them next. There was some random firing from the ambush site which eventually died down. The fires were also nearly exhausted and in the failing light, the Union riders left on the field made no movement. Their sticks of dynamite had mauled them badly.

Back among the surviving squad members in the sheltering trees, Davis looked over the scene of destruction

they had created. Any exaltation at their success was smothered by the sight of their dead companions.

"What about Quince and Lafferty?" asked Tolland. "Are we just going to leave them there?" The angry edge in his voice, the challenge in his questions was plain to everyone.

Davis was quiet for a while, then said, "Ericson, stay here and watch. I'll relieve you in an hour. It may be that the Rebs will be so busy with what we did to them that they'll forget about Quince and Lafferty. Maybe we can still recover them before dawn. I can't promise anything. Once the Rebs have got some control over the train, they are going to come looking for us. And you know what will happen if they catch us."

"Are we going to cross back over the river, then?" asked Abrams.

"I think we'll settle down somewhere further back in the woods and lay low for a day or so," Davis replied.

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"Where did those goddam Yankees go?" Sergeant Canaan, of the 1st Virginia Cavalry, said. The pain in his side burned with every breath he tried to take. "Goddammit, God damn them to hell." He felt his side, finding that the rib was not broken but still hurt bad enough. His horse had bolted and he saw all the other dead horses as well as their riders scattered around the ground lit by the fires from the boxcars. "Still, got to admire them. They got us pretty good, but their time's coming." Bent over in pain, Canaan stumbled over a body next to him.

His eyes grew wide in recognition. “Jesus, Josh.” He knelt and shook him but got no response. Canaan looked around, with the grudging admiration of a fellow soldier, at the devastation caused by just ten minutes of the Yankee attack. He rose, unsteady, unable to fully stand due to the chest wound and picked his way among the bodies of his cavalry troop. Stooping slowly by each man he came upon, Canaan felt for any sign of life. For some, there was nothing; others expired under his hand. Only two other troopers had enough life left that he could help them to their feet and stumble back towards the now smoldering boxcars. They were found by the rest of his troop and carried to the rear.

Ericson, from his post in the woods, watched as Canaan checked on his men. He could have easily brought Canaan down with a single shot from his Spencer, but did not have the heart.

“We’ll see each other again, Sergeant, I bet. Plenty of time to settle scores,” he thought. After activity around the ruined train had moved farther away, the Rebels attended to their dead and wounded. Ericson summoned help and the Union men retrieved their own dead from the field.

Davis’ squad spent the next day deep in the woods. They wrapped Quince and Lafferty in their bedrolls and tied them over their saddles. With nightfall, leaving Tolland in charge, Davis mounted Sam, her shoulder healing nicely, and led the two laden horses back through the woods to the river. All the confederate guards were still back by the railyard leaving the fords unguarded. Davis crossed over returning to his company. He found Lieutenant Stevens with Major Patton.

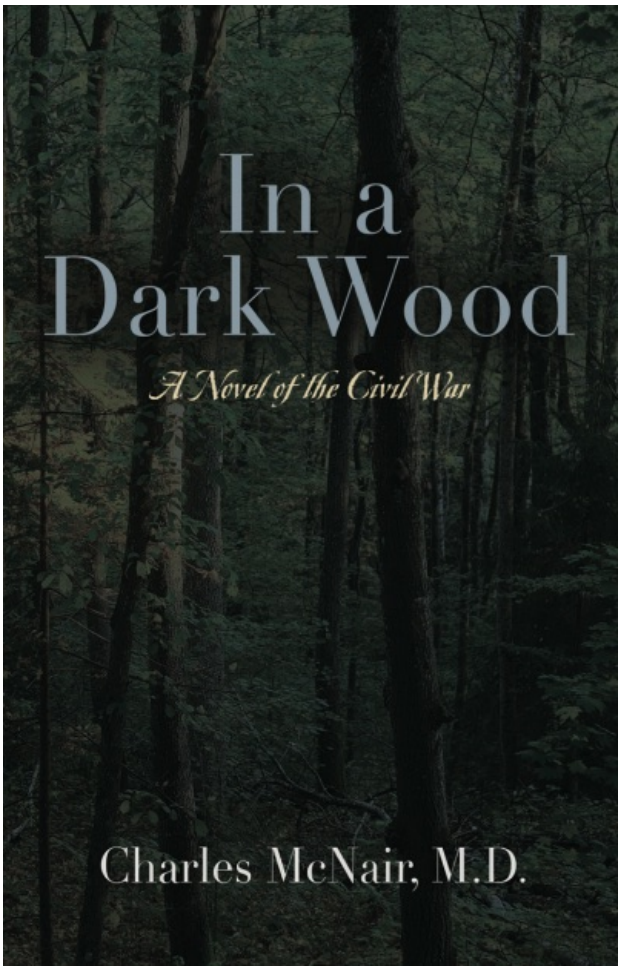
"Sergeant, we heard quite a rumpus a couple of nights ago," began Major Patton. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" Lieutenant Stevens grinned, handing Davis a tin of coffee.

"Some, Major. We were pretty lucky, but even so, still lost two men: Quince and Lafferty. I think we got at least twenty Rebs plus four boxcars and blew up half a mile of track," said Davis but without any sense of triumph. He was still new to killing and these were the first men under his command that he had lost. The Rebel cavalrymen were the first men he knew he had killed. The raid had answered the primal question of every soldier: "Could I kill?" That question answered, it was replaced with a second: "Could I kill again?" He knew that the second killing would be harder than the first. He put that out of his mind for now and concentrated on making a full report to his commanders.

After he had finished, Major Patton complimented him. "Very impressive, Sergeant. You did well and I will remember. Now, how many men do you have still in the woods and how are they holding up?"

"Six, sir. They're doing fine. The re-supply was very helpful."

"Alright, then. I think you have done all that can be done for now, at least from a raiding point of view. Go back across the river and bring them back here. I am sure that after some rest, we can find more for the 3rd Indiana to do. That is all. Dismissed."




This is a novel about the Battle of the Wilderness fought over three days in May, 1864. It was a bloody encounter costing 29,000 casualties. It was the first battle commanded by U S Grant and Robert E Lee and was the first battle of modern warfare.

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By Charles McNair M.D.

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