

CHAPTER 1

Endless Waiting, Endless Drilling

It was dawn on a spring morning in 1863, and the young Union soldiers of the 304th Regiment were just waking up. Most of the 304th were farm boys from New York State who had enlisted in the army of the North. Now, they were camped in rough log huts and tents on a hillside somewhere in northern Virginia.

From their position, they could see the wooded hills opposite them. Rising above the distant trees were scattered puffs of smoke, the remains of the Confederate campfires

that had been burning throughout the night.

For months, the raw troops of the 304th had been at this camp. They had seen no fighting and had only heard reports of great battles between the Union and Confederate armies in this Civil War.

By now, the men were disappointed, frustrated, and bored. They had spent the war drilling endlessly on any open field their lieutenant could find and waiting endlessly for orders to go into battle.

Stretching and yawning as they came out of their tent, Henry Fleming and Tom Wilson, two close friends, headed for the campfire. The regiment's cook was pouring hot coffee into tin cups for the soldiers gathered around him. In between pouring, he was stirring the men's breakfast in a big black pot that was suspended over the fire.

Once breakfast was over, the men scattered about the camp, each looking for ways to keep busy and make the waiting less boring.

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"I think I'll clean my rifle," said Tom, "even though I did it two days ago. Ain't nothin' much else t' do."

"I guess I'll write t' my ma," said Henry. "She worries if she don't hear from me regular, 'specially with pa dead. I know it's hard runnin' the farm without me t' help."

Before the two started off, they heard shouts from the path that led to a small creek below the camp. Running up the path was Jim Conklin, another of the farm boys in their regiment. Jim was waving a wet shirt high above his head to attract attention.

"Hey, Jim," called Henry, "what you doin' all that shoutin' for?"

"I got news!" hollered Jim, trying to catch his breath as a crowd of soldiers surrounded him. "Listen here! I was just down at the creek washin' my shirt and one a' them cavalry fellers was there waterin' his horse. His brother works at division headquarters, an' he told 'im our regiment's goin' up river t'morrow

an' comin' 'round over th' hill behind th' rebels."

"That's a lie!" shouted a corporal. "Yeh don't know what yer talkin' about!"

"Yeah," added Tom Wilson, "I don't believe this army's *ever* goin' t' move. Why, we got ready t' move eight times these last two weeks an' we ain't moved one single step."

The men began arguing among themselves, some believing Jim and others accusing him of making up the story to feel important.

Henry listened to these arguments, first with some doubt, then with eagerness. "So, at last I'm goin' to fight," he whispered to himself. His eyes glowed as he remembered how from the time he was old enough to read, he had pictured himself a hero in every battle throughout history, in every battle in every corner of the world.

So, when this war had come, it was important to Henry to be part of it. His mother had called him a fool and discouraged him. But

Henry was determined and had enlisted in a company that was forming in their town.

When he walked into the barn in his shiny blue uniform, his mother went right on milking their cow, though tears ran down her wrinkled cheeks and her thin body began to quiver as she spoke to him.

“Yeh take care of yerself, son. Yeh do what they tell yeh an’ don’t yeh git in the company of wild fellers who drink an’ swear. Remember that yer pa taught yeh not t’ think a’ anythin’ ‘cept what’s right.”

Before leaving to join his regiment, Henry had stopped at his school to say good-bye to his friends. The young people had crowded around him, admiring his blue uniform with its shiny brass buttons and praising him for his bravery. Even the girls looked at him adoringly, and Henry had beamed with pride.

On the march from New York to Washington, the recruits were welcomed at each town. People prepared feasts, young girls smiled

and flirted with them, and old men complimented them on their bravery. Henry felt like a hero even before his first battle.

But then had come months and months of boredom at this campsite in northern Virginia, where the recruits had done nothing but drill, or try to keep warm, or sit and twiddle their thumbs.

The only enemy Henry had seen or heard was a lone guard on duty on the southern side of a nearby river when Henry was on patrol on the northern side.

“Yankee boy,” the ragged guard had called to him, “y’all seem like a right good young feller, a little dumb mebbe for fightin’, but right good.”

Henry couldn’t help but chuckle, liking the man instantly and regretting for the moment that this friendly man was his enemy.

Now, Henry lay on his bunk, excited at the thought that his regiment was finally about to go into battle. But suddenly, he began to

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have some doubts. "Will I be brave enough to stay and fight, or will I be a coward and run away from the battle?" he asked himself.

Henry jumped up from his bunk and began to pace the floor. "Good Gawd, what's the matter with me?" he cried out loud in a panic.

Just then, his two close friends, Jim Conklin and Tom Wilson, entered the tent. They were still arguing over the news Jim had brought back from the creek.

Henry nervously turned to Jim, whom he had known and trusted since childhood. "Are you sure there's goin' to be a battle?"

"Of course!" Jim answered confidently. "Jest wait 'til t'morrow. Yeh'll see one 'a th' biggest battles ever was."

"A thunderin' lie!" grumbled Tom from a corner of the tent.

Henry ignored Tom's grumbling and asked Jim, "How do you think our regiment'll do?"

"Well, I guess we'll fight all right once the battle begins, though lots a' veterans been

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pokin' fun at us cause we're new."

"Think any of our boys'll run away?" continued Henry.

"A few, mebbe, but that happens in ev'ry regiment th' first time boys're under fire. An' mebbe th' whole regiment'll run if th' fightin's tough at th' beginnin'. But then agin, they might jest stay an' fight real good once they git shootin'."

"And what about you, Jim?" Henry asked with a nervous giggle, as if he meant his question as a joke.

But Jim was serious in his answer. "I s'pose if th' fightin's real hot an' a whole lot a' boys start t' run, I guess I'd run too. But if everybody's a-standin' an' a-fightin', I'd stand an' fight too."

Henry was grateful for his friend's words. They seemed to reassure him that he was not alone in his doubts and fears. "Thanks, Jim," he said softly. "Thanks a heap."

CHAPTER 2

Rumor or Fact?

When the following morning proved Jim's story to be only a rumor, the entire regiment made fun of him, even those who had believed him the day before. Henry, however, took no part in this teasing, for he was still troubled by his own secret doubts.

"Will I be brave when I go into battle or will I be a coward?" he asked himself. "If only I could find another soldier who has these same doubts!"

But whenever he tried to start a conversation with any of the men, he had no luck. Each

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man was absolutely certain he'd be a hero in battle though sometimes Henry believed they were as frightened as he was.

"Should I admit my doubts to them?" he asked himself, then decided, "No! They'd only ridicule me just as they're ridiculin' Jim. I guess the only way I'll ever know the answer is when I actually get into battle."

Days went by, and one morning when the regiment had formed ranks just before dawn, the colonel came riding up on his horse. "At rest!" he ordered.

The regiment stood at rest for what seemed like hours, their eyes fixed on the colonel, who calmly stroked his mustache as he looked across the river at the enemy campfires.

After a while, a messenger came riding up along the road and reined his horse beside the colonel. They had a short conversation, then the colonel called out, "Let's move!"

Cannons creaked and rumbled behind the troops as the men stumbled along through the

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woods. They finally reached a road, where other regiments joined in the march. By the time the sun had risen in the sky, the men were certain now that they were finally on their way into battle. And they laughed and sang as they marched.

At one point, the road took them past a farmhouse, where a horse was tied up out front. "Looks like a real fine animal t' carry my knapsack," said a rather sloppy soldier as he left his column and headed toward the horse.

Just as he was about to untie the animal, a young woman rushed out the door and seized the horse's mane. "Leave my horse alone, you thief!" she cried, and she began beating at the soldier with her fists.

This amused the men in the regiment, and they stopped their march and gathered around the two people.

"Hit 'im with a stick!" one soldier shouted, encouraging the woman.

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"Pull that soldier boy by *his* mane too!" shouted another.

The soldier had to let go of the horse to protect himself from the woman's blows. He finally gave up and hurried back to the jeers of his regiment.

"Some hero! Ha!"

"Try goin' after a skunk nex' time!"

"Mebbe *she'd* fight better in th' regiment than yeh!"

Still in good spirits, the troops continued their march until nightfall, when they broke up into individual regiments. They set up tents in the fields and lit campfires.

Henry lay down in the grass a distance from the other men in his regiment. He wanted to be by himself.

After a while, Tom Wilson walked over to him. "What yeh doin' way over here, Henry?"

"Oh, thinkin'."

Tom sat down and slowly lit his pipe. He took a long drawl, then smiled gleefully. "We

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got 'em now, Henry! We're goin' t' lick 'em good!" Then Tom turned serious. "Actu'lly, *they've* been lickin' *us* in ev'ry battle 'til now. But this time, I feel it in my bones—we'll lick 'em! We'll lick 'em good!"

"I thought you were objectin' to all this marchin'," Henry said coldly.

"I don't mind th' marchin' long as there's fightin' at th' end a' it. What I hate is gettin' moved here an' moved there, with nothin' bein' gained 'cept sore feet an' short rations."

"And how do you know *you* won't turn and run when the fightin' starts?" Henry asked.

"Run?" cried Tom, jumping up. "Course not! I'll do my share a' fightin'. An' besides, who do yeh think yeh are t' question me, th' gen'ral or somethin'?" With that, he strode angrily away.

"Well, you needn't get so mad about it!" Henry called after him. Then he stood up and slowly made his way back to his tent.

CHAPTER 3

A First Battle

The march continued the following day. By nightfall, the regiments reached a river. They set up two pontoon bridges and crossed over to face a mysterious range of hills.

Henry peered up at the hills as he stood on the river bank. "The rebs must be hidin' in those dark woods, just sittin' and waitin' for us," he told Tom.

But once the weary troops set up camp, they had a peaceful night's sleep.

The next morning, the regiment entered a deep, thick forest. They spent several days

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marching and camping through it until one gray dawn when Jim kicked Henry awake.

“What in thunder—?” Henry gasped as he jumped to his feet.

“We’re movin’, Henry. Hurry!”

And before he was completely awake, Henry found himself with the other men in his regiment not marching, but running breathlessly, down a road in the woods.

“What th’ devil they in sech a hurry for?” Tom yelled out to his comrades.

But no one had any answers for him. And no one dared stop running. Each man feared that if he stopped, the mob of troops running behind him would surely trample him to death.

By the time the sun appeared in the sky, other regiments were joining them. “It’s time,” Henry told himself. “The battle is about to begin and I’m about to be tested. Even if I wanted to escape, it’s impossible. Troops are surroundin’ me on all sides. It’s like bein’ in a movin’ box.”

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Henry's head seemed to be fighting what his body was doing. "I didn't want t' be in this war," he argued. "I didn't enlist on my own; the government is takin' me out t' be killed." But he knew this wasn't so!

"Run, Henry, run for your life!" he told himself. And along with his regiment, he slid down the bank of a stream and waded across, with his rifle held high above his head.

As the troops scrambled up the bank on the other side, cannons began to boom. The men climbed up a hill expecting to see a battle scene in the field below. But they found only small lines of their skirmishers. Those soldiers were usually sent out in front of the main army to clear the way for a major attack. The skirmishers were now firing into the trees to rout out any enemy soldiers.

As the regiment began crossing the field, they came upon the body of a Confederate soldier. Most of the men walked around it with hardly a glance. But this was the first corpse

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Henry had ever seen, and he stopped and stared down at it. The man's open eyes gazed up, unseeing, at the sky, and his brownish-yellow beard blew in the wind.

Henry's eyes traveled down to the man's shoes. The soles were worn so thin that one of the soldier's feet stuck out through a large hole. "How sad!" he thought. "This man must've been so poor that he couldn't even afford t' have his shoes fixed!"

All kinds of crazy ideas began to creep into Henry's head as he marched along with his regiment. "Our generals don't know what they're doin'. They're leadin' us into a trap. Soon we're goin' t' be surrounded by those rebs. I'd better warn my comrades that the generals are idiots!"

But as he looked around, Henry saw that his comrades were so fascinated with their advancing march, they would surely laugh at his warning. Dejected, he began to lag behind the other marchers.

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Seeing this, the lieutenant came up to him and tapped at his back with his sword. "Move along, soldier!" he ordered. "Get up into your ranks and stop laggin' behind."

Henry hurried to rejoin the line, hating the lieutenant and all of the officers in the company. "Stupid fools!" he muttered under his breath.

A halt was called to allow the skirmishers to advance farther into the woods. During the halt, the troops began to build small hills in front of them, using stones, dirt, sticks, and anything that might stop or deflect a bullet. These hills caused some arguments among the men.

"I'll *stand t'* do my fightin'!" Tom said with a sneer at the men digging trenches.

"Whatever suits yeh," snapped Jim. "But look around at th' veterans down th' line. They're diggin' up holes like dogs buryin' their bones. They must know somethin'."

Not too long afterward, however, the 304th

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was ordered forward and the men had to leave their newly built hills behind. This happened once, then twice more. Finally, when they were ordered to halt and dig in for a third time, Henry's anger exploded.

"What did they march us here for if we're goin' t' change position each time we feel safe? I can't stand this much longer! All we're doin' is wearin' out our legs for nothin'!"

Jim took out his rations and carefully made a sandwich of pork and crackers. After swallowing it easily, he explained, "I guess we have to explore this here country t' keep the rebs from gittin' too close."

"Well, I'd rather do most anythin' than go trampin' 'round the country doin' no good and jest tirin' myself out!" argued Henry.

"So would I," added Tom as he came over to sit with his friends. "It ain't right. If anybody with any sense was a-runnin' this army, it—"

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“Oh, shut up, yeh little fool!” roared Jim. “Yeh ain’t had that uniform on for more ‘n six months and yeh talk as if—”

“I came here t’ fight and not t’ walk!” argued Tom. “If I jest wanted t’ walk, I could’ve walked round an’ round my barn at home.”

Jim threw up his hands in despair and began making himself another sandwich. As he ate, he returned to being his usual calm self.

That afternoon, as the regiment continued their march with no obvious destination, Henry again began to doubt the general’s sanity in leading the troops. “The way that man’s directin’ this battle, I might as well end my troubles and get killed right away. That’s better than goin’ on this way, not knowin’ when those rebs are goin’ t’ put a bullet in me.”

At that moment, rapid firing in the distance sent shock waves through the troops. Flashes of enemy musket and rifle fire

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scattered the skirmishers advancing ahead of them. Then an explosion from a Confederate cannon landed on the regiment in front of the 304th and sent bodies flying.

Henry stared with his eyes and mouth frozen wide open. When he felt a hand on his arm, he swung around in panic. "Oh, Tom, it's you," he gasped in relief.

Then, seeing his friend's pale, terrified face, he asked, "What's happened, Tom? I've never seen you look like this before."

Tom's lips were trembling as he answered, "This is goin' t' be my f-first an' last battle, Henry. Somethin' tells me I w-won't come out of it alive—"

"Stop talkin' such craziness, Tom!"

"No, listen. I w-want yeh t' take these here things t' my folks." With a sob, he handed Henry a thick yellow envelope.

"What the devil—" But before Henry could say another word, Tom waved a weak good-bye and walked away.