

CHAPTER 15

Protecting the Flag

The captain galloped up and down the line, waving his hat—the signal to begin the attack. With slow, cautious steps, the men left the safety of the woods and broke into a wild run when they reached the clearing.

Yellow flames from enemy artillery came at them from all directions. The line to the right and left of Henry seemed to split from the center, then form into small, separate groups. The men were running wildly and cheering madly. They were convinced that no enemy could stop them, no matter how great the

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odds were against them.

Henry ran desperately toward a distant clump of trees. "That must be where the rebs are hidin'," he told himself as his breath came in gasps.

His face was growing redder from his desperate run and almost matched the blood spot on the rag tied around his head. His lips were drawn hard and tight, and his eyes were shining with a wild glare. That, combined with his disordered, dirty clothes and his wildly swinging rifle, gave Henry Fleming the look of an insane soldier.

Though his gaze was fixed straight ahead, out of the corner of his eye Henry saw a shell tumble and explode furiously into the middle of a group of men. The soldiers threw up their hands to shield their eyes as the explosion flung them in every direction.

Other soldiers, hit by bullets, fell in agony. They formed a trail of wounded bodies and motionless corpses left behind by the regiment

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as it advanced.

Still, Henry kept running blindly into the smoke and gunfire. He wasn't aware that he was in the lead. And after a while, he wasn't even aware that his comrades were beginning to tire.

Instead of running headlong into the hot smoke, the men hesitated. They waited for the smoke to clear and show them the battlefield. With their strength weakened, with their lungs gasping for air, they were no longer the wild, attacking machines they were earlier; they were cautious, fearful men once more.

This caution and fear stopped them in the middle of the battlefield even though the enemy continued firing. Men looked around and saw their comrades dropping to the ground, moaning and shrieking. This sight seemed to paralyze them. Dazed and almost in a stupor, they let their rifles drop limply to their sides as their eyes moved slowly from

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body to body.

Not even the roar of the lieutenant could rouse them from their stupor as he yelled, "Come on, you fools! Come on! You can't stay here in the middle of the field."

But the men stood frozen, staring blankly at him. Tom Wilson was the first to recover from the daze. He dropped to his knees and fired off a shot into the woods. The shot finally shook the men out of their stupor, and they raised their rifles and began firing once again.

Driven across the open field by their officers, the regiment began moving forward. They stopped only to fire and reload every few steps.

They entered a small grove and moved from tree to tree cautiously. Enemy fire was still coming at them from across a large open field at the end of the grove. The thick smoke made it impossible to see farther than the tips of their rifles. Still, the lieutenant was urging

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them forward.

“Come on, lunkheads! We’ll all be killed if we stay here. We’ve only got to go across that field,” he roared, pointing to a large open space between them and the enemy line.

None of the men seemed ready to follow the lieutenant, except Henry and Tom. They hurried to him, and the three men ran down the line, shouting to their comrades, “Come on! Come on!”

The sergeant carrying the Union colors scrambled out in front of the line. A moment later, the shabby-looking troops of the 304th seemed to get inspiration from the sight of their flag, and they surged forward. Rifle shots and yellow bursts of flame came at them from the woods.

Henry lowered his head and ran like a madman to reach the safety of the woods before a bullet could hit him. With his eyes almost closed, his mind formed a picture of his country’s flag. “What a beautiful thing it is!” he

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thought. "I must never let it be conquered or destroyed! I must keep it from harm and it will keep me from harm too!"

At that moment, the sergeant carrying the flag gave a loud cry as a bullet tore into his chest. His body froze and his eyes flew open in disbelief. But his stiff arms kept the flag held high.

Henry sprang for the flag, clutching at the pole with his free hand. At the same moment, Tom lunged for it as well. The two men tried to jerk it out of the dead man's hands, but even in death the sergeant refused to loosen his grip. He was determined to carry his country's colors into battle.

Henry and Tom wrenched furiously and finally freed the flag from the dead man. His raised arms, stiff from keeping the flag held high, swung down onto Tom's shoulder as if to protest the theft of the colors. Helpless now, the dead man swayed backward and crumbled to the ground.

CHAPTER 16

The Mule Drivers' Revenge!

"Give it t' me! Let go of it!" shouted Henry as he pulled on the pole.

"No, let me keep it!" cried Tom.

For each of these young soldiers, carrying the flag into battle showed a willingness to risk his life by not carrying a gun. It took courage for a soldier to lay down his rifle and be defenseless, and both Henry and Tom were now showing that kind of courage.

With a hard, determined pull, Henry managed to get the flag away from Tom. Then he had a moment to look around at the rest of

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the regiment. He was horrified to see the troops slowly backing away from the battle, into the safety of the woods behind them.

“Where you goin’?” Henry howled. “Stay here an’ fight! Shoot into them!”

“What’s the good a’ shootin’ at walls?” cried one soldier.

“They got us beat!” wailed another.

“It’s them lunkhead officers!” shouted still another.

But when the lieutenant ordered the rest of the men back into the woods to regroup, Henry and Tom headed back to join them.

Frustrated and angry, Henry mumbled to Tom, “The way our troops retreated proved those officers were right when they called us mule drivers. If only we’d taken some enemy ground and advanced, we would’ve had our revenge against that lunkhead general!”

Henry looked out at the enemy with hatred and rage, but he felt greater hatred and rage for the cold-hearted general and harsh captain

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who labeled him and his comrades mule drivers without even knowing them!

Still, he held the flag high and joined the lieutenant as he regrouped the regiment. Together, they began pushing and pulling the men into the battle. Those who had the courage to join the line and advance faced round after round of merciless gunfire. Those who still had some courage left after that gunfire were shaken when they saw their comrades falling beside them or running away from the fighting.

The heavy clouds of smoke from the gunfire made it almost impossible to see the enemy. But a sudden break in the smoke revealed the battlefield.

Peering through the break, Henry gasped, "By Gawd! They're about to attack again! There's thousands of 'em!"

With rasping yells, the rebels opened fire. Hundreds of flames spurted out toward the retreating regiment, and clouds of smoke once

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more separated the two armies.

The Union soldiers panicked. Screaming wildly, they began running in all directions, trying to escape the bullets that were smashing into them.

"I could a' swore that the regiment over there was one a' ours," cried one soldier, pointing to the right where the gunfire pouring down on them was coming from.

"Mebbe it is," yelled another, running alongside him. "Mebbe they're lost and don't know they're shootin' at us!"

These words were passed from man to man, sending a wave of hysteria throughout the regiment. A private who had been calm and courageous during the battle now stopped running and sank to the ground. Burying his face in his hands, he wept, "We're doomed!" A corporal who had defended the actions of his officers all along now shrieked, "The general's gone mad! He deserves t' die!"

Henry walked calmly into the midst of this

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hysterical mob and raised the flag higher, for all the men to see. Though his hands were trembling and he was having trouble catching his breath, he stood firmly, hoping that the sight of their country's colors would give the men the courage to continue the battle.

Tom came up to him and solemnly said, "Well, Henry, I guess this is good-bye."

"Oh, shut up, you fool!" cried Henry, turning away from his friend to watch the officers trying to get the men into position to fight off the attack.

"Here they come!" cried the lieutenant. "They're right on top of us! Shoot!" And the rest of his words were lost as thundering gunfire burst out from the regiment.

Henry stared at the approaching enemy. They were so close now, he could see their faces and every detail of their light-gray uniforms. He called out to Tom who was still beside him, "Looks like they were advancin'

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on us through the smoke and didn't rightly know how close they were till the lieutenant spotted them and we opened fire."

The two armies were exchanging gunfire at such a rapid pace that the smoke never had a chance to clear. All Henry could see were flashes of flame and dark clouds of smoke. All he could hear were angry gunshots and clanging ramrods. All he could do was continue to hold the flag high as his comrades went on firing.

Soon, the bullets from the rebels slowed down. "Hold your fire!" the lieutenant called to the regiment.

The men stood still, gazing as the smoke cleared. The battlefield soon came into view. Not a living Confederate soldier was to be seen . . . only an empty ground with scattered corpses twisted into grotesque shapes.

The Union soldiers sprang out from behind their trees and bushes. They began shouting and dancing for joy.

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"They're gone!"

"We chased 'em, fer sure!"

"An' them officers said we couldn't do it."

"Guess we showed 'em!"

"Guess we earned our red badges!"

Henry thrust the flag pole into the ground in front of him and saluted proudly. "You *did* keep us from harm," he said with solemn dignity.

Then, smiling at the troops of the 304th Regiment, he added, "It looks like the mule drivers have had their revenge!"

CHAPTER 17

Criticism and Praise

With the fighting over, the weary, battered troops of the 304th hurried back to their own lines. On the way, they passed a group of haggard veterans from another company. The men lay resting in the shade of some trees. Seeing the young troops, the veterans began to tease them.

“What yeh comin’ back fer?”

“Where yeh been?”

“Was it too hot fer yeh out there, sonny?”

“Goin’ home t’ mama now?”

The weary regiment tried to ignore these

teasing insults. But the cruel words made several of the men feel like criminals for having retreated, even though they won the battle. And they hung their heads in shame as they trudged along...all except Henry, who glared at the veterans.

Once back at their own lines, Henry and Tom turned to look at the battlefield they had just won.

“By Gawd!” exclaimed Henry. “I figured we took a whole lot more ground than this!”

“An’ those woods where we had that last skirmish are much nearer than I would a’ guessed too,” added Tom.

The fighting time also lasted much shorter than Henry thought. “I guess my mind’s just playin’ tricks on me,” he decided. “There’s just no takin’ the measure of a battle when you’re in the middle of it!”

As the troops flung themselves down and began gulping water from their canteens, the general who had called them mule drivers

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came galloping along the line. He had lost his hat and his hair streamed wildly about his angry face. He jerked furiously at the reins on his horse as he pulled to a halt in front of the colonel.

“By thunder, MacChesnay, what an awful mess you made of this battle!” he roared. “Why in heaven’s name did you stop your men a hundred feet this side of success? Just a hundred feet more and you would have made a great charge. But as it is, all your men seem to be able to do is dig trenches in the mud! You’ve got a command of mud diggers!”

The men were listening intently, hoping the colonel would come to their defense, to explain that the regiment was *not* made up of mud diggers, but courageous fighting men.

Instead, the colonel simply shrugged and calmly explained, “Oh, well, sir, we went as far as we could.”

“As far as you could! Well, that wasn’t very

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far! Your orders were to divert the enemy troops *away* from General Whilterside. But just listen to that firing in the woods. *That's* how well you succeeded. Whilterside's being attacked now!" With that, the general wheeled his horse around and rode away.

The lieutenant approached the colonel. "Sir," he said firmly, "I don't care what that man is—a general or what—but if he says our boys didn't put up a good fight out there, well, he's a damned fool!"

"Lieutenant," began the colonel severely, "this is my problem and—"

The lieutenant backed away. "All right, sir, all right." But he was proud that he had spoken out in defense of his regiment.

As the news of the criticism of the regiment went down the line, the men were bewildered. It had to be a mistake!... But then they realized that their efforts were unimportant, and this angered every man in the regiment.

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“What does he want from us?” raged Tom. “We weren’t out there pitchin’ horseshoes!”

Henry seemed calm enough as he explained, “The general probably didn’t see anythin’ of the battle at all and just got mad because we didn’t do exactly what he wanted. But we know we did our best and fought good. It’s just our awful luck!”

“Well, there’s no fun in fightin’ for people when everythin’ yeh do—no matter what—don’t please ‘em,” shouted Tom. “Mebbe next time, I’ll stay behind an’ let ‘em go to th’ devil with their charge!”

“Next time, let that lunkhead general come onto the battlefield with us. We’ll show him what—” But Henry didn’t get a chance to finish, for several men came running up, their faces eager to share some news.

“Oh, Fleming!” cried one man as he and the others circled around Henry and Tom. “Yeh got t’ hear this. The colonel met yer lieutenant right near us, and he asked him who was the

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lad who carried the flag. When the lieutenant said it was Fleming, the colonel said 'He's a good man.' And the lieutenant he went on t' say, 'And so's the feller Wilson who was at the head a' the charge with Fleming, both a' them howlin' like Indians.' And the colonel then sez—now listen to this—the colonel sez, "*They deserve t' be major generals!*"

"Major generals? No!" exclaimed Tom in disbelief. "Yer lyin'!"

"Go to blazes!" added Henry. "He never said that. You're makin' it up."

But Henry and Tom knew it was true. Their faces turned red in embarrassment, and although they protested, they were actually thrilled. As the two friends exchanged secret glances, congratulating each other, their anger at the general and captain was quickly forgotten. All they felt was affection and gratitude for their colonel and their lieutenant.