

Hard Pillow

Fort Pillow, Tennessee – April 12, 1864

6:00 a.m.

Crisp morning air makes my skin tingle and bump; creating a foreboding of things to come for me and our company of men as we scan the dim, misty fields in front of us. Cracks of gunfire in the distance has us up and in our boots as the pre-dawn clouds lighten into pale hues of purple and orange.

Wrinkling my nose, I suck in my cheeks and clear the sticky moisture in my mouth to spit a now-flavorless wad of tobacco on the ground. I'm glad my sergeant doesn't mind a little bit of chew.

Lieutenant Barr and Sergeant Walker are issuing our orders. "Okay men, we've got Rebels on our damn doorstep and a decent size force at that. We need to get out there and hold the line at the breastworks before they can use them against us."

The thought occurs to me those breastworks weren't much more than a long ditch with the dirt mounded up on the opposite side, just big enough for a soldier to hide behind without getting his head shot off.

Sergeant Walker barked, "Corporal Michael Click, your company is with me."

"Yes Sir!" I'm still surprised I made corporal after being enlisted for only a few months, likely because I'm older and a minister at the Primitive Baptist Church back home.

The Captain looks to Lieutenant Barr and Sergeant Poston. "I want Companies E and D to take the inner breastworks and stay entrenched. Fight as long as you can without getting captured. Artillery will shell those Butternuts while you take your positions."

A voice came from the ranks behind us. "You mean we're supposed to trust those companies of Negroes to shoot cannon over our heads without killing us?"

The Captain stiffens with a dour face and stern voice, "The two artillery companies are UNION soldiers and handle cannon as good as any. Now go, we've lost too much time already."

At his order, we charged for the breastworks. My ears stung as the first volley of cannon shot discharges behind us. We swarmed the field like scattering ants.

A willowed-looking private hollers through gritted teeth, “I hope blacky knows the difference between blue coats and gray coats.” He wasn’t joking. I understand his fear, seeing trees and debris fly into the air while shells and canisters explode in the short distance in front of us. I feel their effect hammering my chest.

Bullets whiz by as we run; inspiring me to run lower and harder. One lands in a thud, followed by a gurgling yelp and a rolling crash on the ground just behind me. I don’t look. I don’t stop. The snake-like trench that was the breastworks is just ahead.

Our group scatters as we race into the trench. I dive into the grassy pit headfirst, biting my lip as my body comes to an abrupt halt. I hear the grunts and groans of fellow soldiers as they too hit the short dirt wall in an effort to evade flying lead.

There are a few Union soldiers holding the trench before we arrived. It was the lookouts who had retreated from the forward areas where the rebels had first drawn into view. I was just to the right of one of them.

I watch him as he takes a shot over the mound, lowers himself, and rolls onto his back. He takes a deep breath and looks over at me. I didn’t recognize him, but I could see he was only eighteen or nineteen, not much older than my son, George.

“Thar was only a few a bit ago. Seems to be more of ‘em every time I look over the mound. Damn good shots too!” His thick, country accent gave him away as a hayseed. He bolted his next round and rolled back over for another volley.

Kneeling there, I began to feel the moisture of the ground working through my pants. I settle my breathing, then slowly push my face up past the new grass, red ants, and dirt. My eyes crest and view the uneven ground, overgrowth, and some trees. Behind are gray hats, coats, and rifles pointed in my general direction. Puffs of smoke billowed in the distance as they fired at my friends...at me.

Finding a figure behind a tree, I aim and squeeze the trigger. My shoulder flinches, my right ear rings from the discharge, and the smell of powder burns my nose. In the distance, a large chunk of tree bark explodes and the figure pulled back.

I slide down the embankment before any could return the favor. Three consecutive whizzes pass overhead; the last slicing the top of the mound and pelting me with dirt.

I look eastward down the curving trench and find our men peeping over the top and firing much like myself. Behind them was an orange sun rising through the distant trees. I looked back toward the fort to see the cannons blazing in turn and men lining the battlements.

We're going to be okay; I try to convince myself. I turn around onto my knees again, but this time to pray.

"Dearest Father in Heaven. Forgive me for partaking in a battle that will cause death this day. Forgive me also for my many sins. For leaving Nancy to fight, even though I feel you have called me to do what is right. For leaving my children. For leaving my church that even now seems to only serve women and children since so many men serve in these ranks. I pray gracious Lord that you protect me this day and my brothers with me. And if I should fall this day, Lord may you take me into your eternal hands and care well for those I leave behind. Thank you in the name of Christ Jesus."

Taking a deep breath, I prepare to look over the mound again. I ignore the tickles of tears rolling down my cheeks. I'm terrified.

My eyes and rifle barrel crest the breastwork. I see a hat raise up over a small mound in the distance and I shoot at it. I hear a yelp; either of surprise or a hit I don't know.

My right shoulder jolts as I lower myself down. Turning, I see the top of my jacket torn right down the seam. I reach with my left hand and find a bullet had gone through, taking a quarter inch of flesh with it. It didn't even hurt. My cheeks puff as I exhale in relief it wasn't worse.

I flip over onto my back and begin loading a round. I look to the fellow next to me to show him my close call. He lay motionless atop the breastwork mound as if napping. His right eye socket and cheekbone were missing and fluids ran down his cheek and neck to the ground.

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Panic runs through my nerve endings. Can't think about that now; I must survive.

I find reassurance as fellow soldiers nearby fight on. A stinging pain begins to bite at my shoulder. I guess it's going to hurt after all.

Seeing that poor lad causes anger to well up within me. I looked to my men on both sides and yell an order, "Keep changing locations so the enemy can't get a bearing on you." I scooted to the right several feet. Concern hits me as I realize we are too spread out to make a strong defense.

The now-dead soldier was right. Every time I looked over the mound the enemy grew in numbers. The ground trembles as cannonballs strike, some so close that debris rains down around me. My mouth is full of grit and too dry to spit.

The sun is well over the tree line when Corporal Poston scrambles low behind the breastworks to my position. He plops down next to me, gulping air. His face swathed in dirt, sweat, snot, and blood.

"The Captain says there are just too many rebels for us to stay here. At the sound of the horn we retreat to the fortifications. Pass it along"

"Alright. Take my place here", I reply.

10:00 a.m.

I was nearly at Cold Creek when a distant bugle blew retreat.

"Retreat! To the fort!", I yell. We jump into a full run. Bullets buzzed like bees around a bear in the hive.

As I ran, I returned fire to give the retreating troops a chance to escape. Two men nearby fall to ground under the heavy fire of the enemy.

I halt next to a fallen soldier and his dead horse to turn and fire. I shoot a rebel running over the breastworks in the distance. I see him collapse into the trench. As the shot's ringing sound fades, I hear someone shouting "Watch for the Creek! They're in the creek!" I turn to see the

creek, just twenty paces away, bristling with gray hats and rifle barrels peeking over the bank's edge. The rifles began to flash, each followed by a puff of smoke.

I didn't hear the shot. I only feel it like a log being thrust into my rear, lower left ribs, pushing me sideways where the horse lay. I tripped over the saddle and land between it and its dead rider.

Time seemed to stop as I lay, stunned, looking straight up. A single cloud disrupted an otherwise crystal-blue sky adorned with wisps of cannon smoke floating on the winds.

I'm afraid to look at my mid-section. I struggle to turn to see the fort and saw my company running into the fortification. Patton and Thomas both ran around the far-right side. Good, they're still going.

Farther down I saw Lieutenant Barr running, his hat marking him. I could see debris escape his chest and his body jolt. He fell forward not four strides from the fort and lay still on the ground.

Intense pain in my midsection made me lay back on the ground and return to looking at the sky. I pull my shirt up and grope to find a small, wet hole in my lower back on the left side. I can clearly see the larger one under my sternum. Small entry, big exit. I feel like a deer after the hunt.

I grab a loose piece of skin in my middle and pull it back, it swings out as if hinged. Attached to it is the lower inch of my sternum. I cover it and relax back onto the ground. I feel sick.

2:00 p.m.

I wake to the sound of ... jeering from the fort, but no gunfire. The Negroes from the artillery units were insulting the rebels. I wondered if the battle was over. I realize I must have passed out, seeing the sun is well past its midpoint. I can also hear the rebels moving down the creek on my left, but I'm afraid to look over the horse to see.

Flies buzz around my stomach. I wave them away in disgust and draw my jacket over the blood that is now very tacky. The air stinks but I'm not sure if it's me, the horse, or the dead guy.

I lean up on one elbow to look over and beyond the dead soldier. A half dozen of our men are speaking with several gray coats. Both groups carry a white flag. I lay back down. A truce maybe? A surrender?

My thoughts drift to my lovely wife Nancy. Oh, she is beautiful. Her hair tied in a bun all day long, but at night she lets those long, wavy strands down and lays next to me. How do I deserve that? Then I have my kids. George is tall like me, then there's little Michael. Got three gorgeous girls in between. I can't believe I left them for this. I want to go home.

3:00 p.m.

My thoughts linger and I struggle to stay awake. Horns in the distance sound a charge followed by thousands of guns firing from the breastworks, from the creek, and across the open field. A wall of gray charges forward. Lord save us, how many men do they have? Firing from the fort held them at bay, but only for minutes. They simply outnumbered us, and numbers often win.

The charge continued, some running right past me. They scaled the fortified wall, and that's when the screaming became louder than the gun fire. It hurt for me to turn, but I had to see.

Union soldiers ran out the unprotected rear of the fort, but they were being gunned down as fast as they emerged. Yelling, shouting, and death cries filled the air. The cannons fired no more.

The sound of fighting grew more distant and the battle worked its way down the embankment toward the river. I see three men on their knees, two black soldiers and one white, surrounded by a circle of rebels. It was Sergeant Walker. A rebel soldier rammed the butt of his gun into the first black Union soldier's head. He turned and thrust his bayonet into the others chest. Both fell. A second rebel was yelling at the Sergeant before turning his rifle on him and shooting him in the head.

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Oh God! They're not giving quarter. They'll kill everyone.

I strain to get up to find a hiding place. I kneel beside the horse and stand partway up. Pain! The world spins and I can't draw breath. My chest feels like a brick that won't fill with air. It hurts to even try. I slumped onto the horse and slid down its neck, then onto the ground.

12:00 pm, April 13th

I open my eyes. My blurry vision clears to see a bandaged-up soldier holding a silver tray with bottles and white cloth. A doctor with thinning black hair and glasses kneels on my right, tending my stomach wound. My tension eases, though I felt tired and cold, so very cold. Oddly enough, I didn't feel a large amount of pain. I don't feel much.

"Ah, the Corporal awakens. I wasn't sure if you would." His face was dismal as he looked into my eyes.

"Where am I?"

"You're on the ship Silver Cloud. We are heading to a hospital in Mound City."

"Is the fighting done?"

"Corporal, the battle was done yesterday afternoon. You're lucky they found you before we departed."

"So, we won then?"

The doctor stopped, straightened, and spoke while dressing my wounds. "No corporal, your unit was devastated. I reckon half your battalion is dead, and most of the rest taken prisoner, save soldiers like yourself who are too injured to worry about."

Moans and painful cries mixed into the conversation from a multitude of injured. "Well I'll be" I said out loud as I saw Sergeant Walker across the aisle with a huge white bandage wrapped around his left eye and head. "Tough old fart even lived through that"

Men with white aprons streaked in blood moved from person to person. I turned back to the doctor. "What of the artillerymen?"

“Poor bastards. Many that didn’t get killed during the fight were killed or maimed shortly afterwards. Several captured white fellas from your battalion were shot or beaten to death simply for fighting alongside those men. They’re already calling it the Fort Pillow Massacre. I think there’s only a handful of them alive.”

“Lord have mercy. They were good men. Major Bradford? Major Booth?” I ask.

“Booth was shot through the heart. Major Bradford on the other hand was captured yesterday but turned up dead today. They said he tried to escape.” The doctor finished his bandaging and covered me with a thin blanket.

“Doctor, I’m so cold.”

He put his hand on my chest, careful to avoid my bloody shoulder. “You’ve been bleeding into your left lung since yesterday. You have pieces of rib scattered inside you, a busted sternum, torn diaphragm, and maybe some intestinal damage. You’ve lost much blood and are near shock. I was simply hoping to make you as comfortable as I could until Mound City; but I’d make my peace with the Lord, Corporal. While you can.”

He put his hand on the side of my head and said, “Bless you soldier”, then stood and walked away.

Other than a light pain in my stomach and side, I felt nearly nothing. I could barely feel the waves moving the ship as we went down river. The gray ceiling above me began to blur as my eyes grew wet and my lips quivered.

I ask God to forgive me and take care of my family. Then I think of Nancy. I close my eyes. My vision sees her there as if she was in front of me. Her hair in a tight bun, hanging clothes on the line that was strung between two trees. The kids are running in the tall grasses beyond her and she was smiles as the sun shines on the horizon. The breeze whips my white shirts on the line, and she laughs. I tell her I love her. She blushes and reaches her hands out to me.

2019-08-09

Then cold begins to settle in and the shining sun behind her fades, like a late autumn evening, fading until I could no longer see her face. The blackness that has no retreat beckons, embraces, then claims me.

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War at the best, is terrible, and this war of ours, in its magnitude and in its duration, is one of the most terrible. - *Abraham Lincoln*