

BLUE SKY and GRAY SMOKE

By Chad Strong

Sample

A barbaric yawp surging from his throat, George charged the creek with his rifle, bayonet affixed, clutched tightly in both hands. From the other side of the creek the cloud of gray charged him, itself a screaming, dagger-clawed beast. He was certain it would rake him, tear him. But he was charging forward regardless — the company had their orders.

He heard the captain call out something but he could not discern the words through the chaotic cacophony and commotion about him. Men shouted and screamed. Everywhere, from within their ranks and without, bullets sped from the smoke and the forest like insects on a wild and deadly spree. Mortars boomed and shells soared for the sun. Always, always they fell short and plummeted to earth, whistling their eerie swan songs.

George didn't know which one sang for him, but one of them did. The blast of soil, water, and shrapnel shoved him yards beyond his own stride and slammed him face down on the bank. The ground shook beneath him as another shell exploded nearby. Mud and water sprayed his blue uniform from head to foot. He flung his arms over his head.

The captain's voice came to him through the din somehow, "Who's firing those? Who in blazes is firing —."

George hoped the captain hadn't been cut off as abruptly as his words. He didn't have to release his head and look up to know that the shells were killing both sides. Somebody was making a big mistake.

Something — he didn't pause to consider what — made him look up. A Confederate soldier was coming for him, splashing through the shallow creek with his bayonet ready. With tunnel vision George watched him. Where was his own weapon? His right hand reached around, frantically slapping the mud for the feel of wood and metal. Rocks, mud, reeds. The rebel was only four steps away. Panicking, George twisted and tried to stand.

Searing pain ripped through his left leg and he wailed in shock. Dropping to his knees he spotted his rifle, fell toward it and yanked it upright just as the reb's bayonet slipped through his sack coat and into his left shoulder. The new pain ignited a rage that compelled George to thrust his own bayonet up into the enemy's belly. The blade in his shoulder jerked and in reflex George yanked his to the right. The rebel soldier cried out and fell beside him in the creek.

The graycoat's blade ripped out of George's shoulder as he fell, but George's blade stuck and was nearly yanked out of his hands as he fell forward on top of the other. For a stunned moment George could only lie atop him. Then he saw the red blood oozing from the graycoat's belly and pooling on the surface of the creek water next to him. With a grunt George shoved himself up and off the enemy soldier.

The movement sent pain raging through his shoulder and leg again. He pressed a hand to his bleeding shoulder and looked down at his leg. About halfway below his knee it was gone.