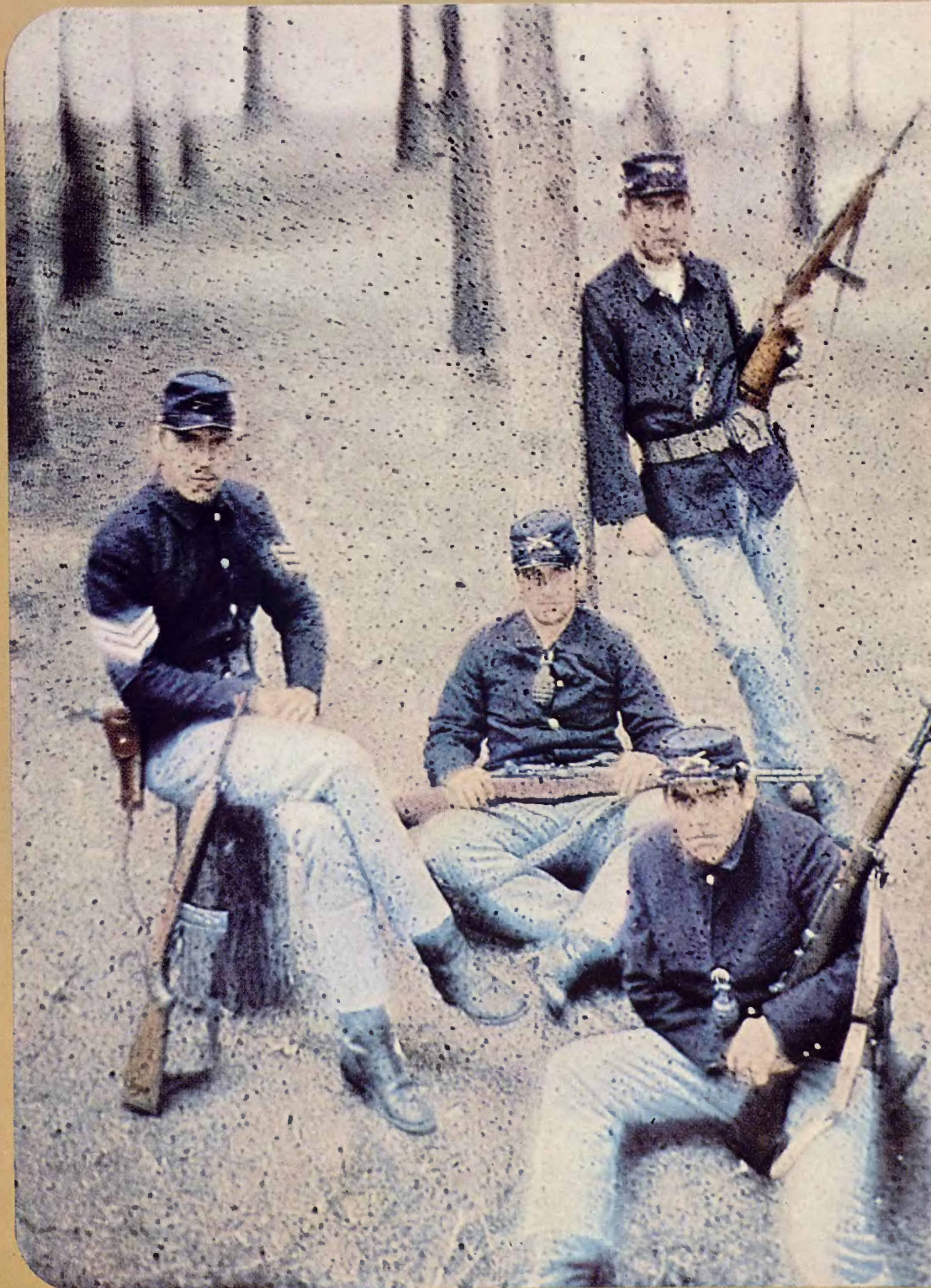

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHUCK WOOD

The Chronicle Of The 656th

they faced an army of their great-grandfathers, an army that was the last hope of a dying nation—and their duty was to destroy it

fiction By GEORGE BYRAM

I AM NOT a frivolous man. I detest practical jokes of all kinds, most especially those involving matters of serious interest. I consider any deliberate attempt to subvert knowledge—such as the Piltdown-man hoax—almost criminal. I believe that this is the only attitude a true historian *could* have. Thus, I was extremely annoyed with Clifford Hanson.

I must record that Hanson is one of the best students I have ever encountered and, furthermore, a steady young man who has never shown any signs of playing antics with the recorded past. I was, therefore, astonished when he presented me with a weird forgery apparently concocted in an effort to solve two small but quite salient mysteries that occurred in the same geographical location, though separated by some 80 years. I still remember how angry it made me at the time.

Hanson, to begin at the beginning, has a most lucrative hobby that combines his interest in early 19th Century building methods with a small business. He searches out authentic structures erected between 1800 and 1865 and buys them for relatively small sums in order to salvage the old brick, walnut timbers or antique pegged flooring. These he sells at a good price to builders of fashionable

new houses or to makers of custom furniture. In the spring of 1966, he bought a nondescript old building near Nashville —one that had variously played the roles of warehouse, stable, storehouse for farm machinery and, finally, derelict. It was about to be razed to make way for a housing development.

At first, the building seemed in no way unusual. Hanson had determined, from county courthouse records, that the edifice was put up in 1865, and his knowledge of the construction methods of that day confirmed it. Confirmed it, that is, until he came to the flooring. The boards, said Hanson, were the right age, but something about the way the floor was laid seemed indefinably wrong. After all these years, it was still a good, solid floor, but its carpentry differed, Hanson noticed, in many small details from the customary workmanship of the local craftsmen of that past era. Hanson was even more surprised to discover beneath the floor a small quarter basement.

Now, the sum of all these things occurred to Hanson as quickly as it would occur to any of us: 1865, a year of devastation around Nashville, where a great battle had just been fought; an ex-Confederate knowing that he must hide the family treasures; the hand of an amateur carpenter laying the floor; then, the quarter basement completely sealed off and hidden. When he lowered himself down, Hanson was almost certain that he would find an old ironbound chest. In fact, he found two.

They held no jewelry, no gold pieces, no family silver. One contained some twisted metal. The other contained some old papers, which, a few days before the university opened in the fall, Clifford Hanson brought to me.

When I came to examine them, I found that the topmost papers were certain orders and documents pertaining to the Battle of Franklin, a Civil War action that took place at the end of November 1864. For me, a splendid discovery! Perhaps it is not too immodest to note that I am the author of *A Study of the Tactics Employed by General J. B. Hood, C. S. A., During the Tennessee Campaign of 1864* (Sewanee: University Press of the South, 1962).

I made a quick survey of the find. The loose sheets were made of the familiar stout rag paper of the 1860s, originally grayish in color but now foxed and rather yellow. The last object in the stack was a surprise. It was a dun-colored, bound notebook, roughly eight inches by ten in size, containing 80 pages in three different styles of handwriting. The title page read: "The Chronicle of the 656th R. C. T." There was no other identification. I took one look at the paper and I knew that I was faced with a shameless forgery! It was yellowed, faded, flaking and extremely brittle to the touch. I had to be careful lest it fall to dust in my hands. I knew at once that it was modern paper—the kind of wood-pulp, high-acid-content paper that didn't appear until considerably *after* the Civil War. When I read the first page or two, I was extremely irritated. I got Hanson on the telephone and ordered him to come to my house at once.

He arrived in a short time—the tall, long-faced, sober young man I'd learned to trust through his three years of graduate study. Something told me that I wasn't being quite fair, but my anger urged me on. "If one wishes to play a stupid hoax on a historian," I said, "one should learn to do it with finesse. This is so transparent as to be laughable!" My anger accounts for my brutal language.

Hanson looked genuinely nonplused. "Sir?" he said. "Hoax? Transparent? I really don't understand."

"This notebook among your so-called Civil War papers," I said. "If you had taken care to read it, you would see that it plainly identifies itself as a record of the 656th Regimental Combat Team, *which was formed in 1943*. You would have noticed that this was an experimental cadre designed to operate behind Japanese lines in northern China. You would also have seen that it was a self-contained infantry outfit with mule transport, carrier pigeons rather than radio, but with the most modern weapons and demolition supplies. The chronicle, you'll be good enough to note, says that the 656th was sent into middle Tennessee on a training mission on *November 18, 1944*."

Hanson was staring at the papers, still refusing to look guilty. It struck me then that the hoax was perhaps being played on both of us by a third person. "I confess I haven't read the papers," Hanson said. "I brought them directly to you. I notice, sir, that the notebook paper *does* seem to be old."

"It's modern paper that somebody has put through an aging process."

"What would you say this is all about?"

"Well, my guess is that some amateur historian, Civil War buff, has bungled his joke. He managed to do a credible job of fakery on some papers having to do with the Battle of Franklin, but he very stupidly left among them a purported document of 1944 vintage."

Hanson still looked at me very calmly. "The paper is dated 1944, sir? Then why do you think somebody put it through an aging process in order to make it look older than that?" He had me there. I could only shake my head in puzzlement. "Let me tell you about the floor, sir," he said. "When pegs have been set for a long time, the peg and the wood into which it was driven sort of grow together—you might say they mate. There is no possible way to pull them apart and then remate them. I'd recognize that in a minute. I'll swear on my life that I was the first one to move those floor boards since 1865."

The upshot of all this was that I apologized to Hanson for my suspicions and then we went our separate ways next day—he to Washington to get access to World War Two files and I to the rare-books section of the university library, where I watched over two technicians who, with infinite care, photostated every leaf of the papers.

When Clifford Hanson came into my office three days later, he was looking most uneasy and perplexed. I was sorry that I had ever accused him of duplicity. "The 656th," he said as he sat down, "has never been deactivated. It has disappeared, but it still exists! It's a living ghost."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Please, Clifford, an orderly, scholarly presentation."

"Sorry," he said. "Well, I won't bore you with the details of my search, except to say that the Department of Defense sent me to the Department of the Army, who sent me to Archives, who sent me to. . . . But the outcome was that I found a Lieutenant Colonel McInnes—a military historian—who got interested in the matter and got all the files opened up for me.

"Well, the basic facts jibe. The roster of the 656th corresponds with the list given in that notebook. The outfit's T/O, T/E and mission are just as set down in the chronicle. On November 18, 1944, the 656th went on maneuvers in middle Tennessee. That was the last ever heard of it."

"Nonsense!" I said. I'm afraid that some of my bad temper came back in a rush. "An entire regimental combat team does *not* desert en masse and get away with it."

"No," said Hanson slowly, "it doesn't. And that's the conclusion the War Department finally reached back in 1945. But they reached it only after one of the most frantic searches you could imagine. The Army Air Corps covered the area; the Military Police combed it; the C. I. D. and the C. I. C. sifted every town, village and city for deserters. Not a clue. G-3 poured fire and brimstone on everybody concerned. Finally, they had to give up. A year later, all the next of kin were notified by telegram that their soldiers were missing in action and presumed dead. Insurance policies were paid. Every scrap of paper was classified Top Secret and the whole thing was swept under the rug. It was as if a whole body of troops stepped off the planet one sunny day in November—and left no forwarding address."

There was no use sitting around and scratching our heads. "You take the 1864

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papers," I said. "I'm going to read the chronicle of the 656th."

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The chronicle had been kept in the beginning by First Sergeant Otis Hodge. His entries, which went through November 23, were terse and accurate but with many misspelled words and some bad sentence structure. Obviously, a man of some ability and little education. On the 24th, the commander, Colonel John Gilbert, took over the chronicle and kept it to its conclusion, except for two items at the end. The chronicle is more minutely detailed than one would expect from an Army officer. (Later, I went to the trouble of finding out about its author. I discovered that's exactly what he was. An author. Prior to World War Two, John Gilbert was one of the lesser-known American novelists.)

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November 24, 1944. This is being written in bivouac. I begin the happenings of this strange day at 1330 hours. We were marching across open, rolling hills, approaching a densely wooded area. Out to our left 600 yards were some isolated rock formations, making ideal targets for mortar fire. We unpacked several crates of shells, fired for ten minutes, making some admirable hits, then quickly packed and ran for the woods, simulating an actual situation of hit and run. Then we followed an old, rutted road leading through the woods. As the head of the column reached the far side, I called a rest halt.

Major Bateson Powers, a native of this area, who was sent along to make sure we didn't wander out of the uninhabited sector the Army had reserved for live-ammunition training exercises, was at the head of the column, scanning the terrain into which we would move. Our doctor, Captain Fritz Payson, Lieutenant George Michelson and First Sergeant Hodge were with me in approximately the center of the column. I was sitting with my back to the road. Sergeant Hodge was facing me. The captain and the lieutenant were lying on their backs with their eyes closed. We were talking about nothing of any consequence when *something happened.*

I was idly observing the woods over Hodge's shoulder. There was what seemed to be a pulse of light all around us; but in the moment of seeing it, my eyes seemed to go out of focus and I wasn't sure I had seen anything. I cannot be sure how long it lasted, but when my eyes focused again, I knew the woods was not the same. Leaves, twigs, branches, even the boles of trees seemed subtly shifted. I looked at Hodge. He was looking past me and his eyes were wide with astonishment. It was the first time I had ever seen his face uncontrolled.

"The road is gone!" he exclaimed.

Up and down the column, men began to get to their feet in bewilderment. Everyone knew that something had happened, but there had been no sound, no feeling, except (at least, in my case) what seemed to be a wrenching of the senses.

The gangling figure of Major Powers was coming on the run along the natural opening the road had followed. He had to dodge an occasional tree that grew in the center of where the road had been.

The men were beginning to collect in groups, talking and looking uneasily over their shoulders. I ordered Hodge to take charge and to see that nobody wandered off. Then I took the major and Lieutenant Michelson aside for a conference.

Immediately, Powers said, "I had my field glasses focused on an old, lightning-struck oak snag up there on the ridge we'd have to climb. It turned into a green young tree right before my eyes."

His long, aristocratic face wore an unusual expression—of embarrassment. I couldn't quite tell whether he was embarrassed because he was saying something that was patently impossible or because he *knew* that he had seen the impossible and was frightened.

"What do *you* think?" I asked Michelson. He looked amused and unworried—Michelson is a man of about 30, but he always seems to be a large-scale boy. A very confident, self-reliant boy, it's true, but forever immature. That's why he made a superb platoon leader but would make a terrible company commander.

He laughed. "I slept through it all, sir. I really did—I dozed off. But"—and he became more sober—"when I came to, I could see that the whole terrain had changed. When my eyes closed, I'd been looking off to the left there. It was heavy brush and saplings. Look now! You can see a kind of a clearing and under that oak there's a fallen-down log cabin."

Powers spoke again, in a troubled voice. "Did you feel anything?" I did. I don't mean that sort of odd light effect. I suddenly had the feeling that my wife had died. I don't mean that I *thought*—I mean that I knew it in my heart.

I called Hodge over to us. "Get all the noncoms together," I said. "Have them take the men up to that ridge line yonder. We're going to bivouac here *and* we're going to dig in. Understand? I want a defense perimeter established along the ridge. Machine guns on the flanks. Pick a good spot for an o. p."

I was glad Hodge was with me. I'd trade anyone in the regiment for him. His combat record was splendid. He was tough and brave—and, best of all, he had a very limited imagination. Because of an odd mix-up at headquarters, the 656th was far under strength in officers. Until we got some replacements, my senior noncoms were doing the officers' jobs. I liked it that way. I hoped we'd never get any shavetails from O.C.S.

"Oh, yes. And, Hodge, bring me one of the pigeon cages." Every day about this time, we reported our position back to the Columbia H.Q. I wanted to keep the men busy and I wanted to maintain the normal routine until I could get some clue about what had happened.

"If I can make a suggestion, John?" said Powers. "Why don't you tell H.Q. to send a light recon plane over? I think the men are a little jittery and that ought to straighten them out."

"The general will think I'm off my rocker," I said. Then I had a second thought. "Maybe. Maybe that's not so bad. We'll call it a camouflage exercise. Have the men camouflage and request that recon plane to take some photos. The pictures will show if anything really crazy has happened."

I released the pigeon at 1500 hours. The men had dug in and Hodge had done a good job of supervising the camouflage. George Michelson had taken a corporal and a couple of men on a reconnaissance. I'd ordered the cooks to give the men an early meal—a hot meal of C rations. In actual combat conditions, we'd probably live off K rations, but on this exercise we had the luxury of Coleman stoves and a supply of C rations. When Michelson got back, the four of us sat around the officers' club and had a drink—the club being Fritz Payson's shelter half, two stumps and a boulder; and the drinks being bourbon and branch in paper cups.

Fritz, I should note, was a dual-purpose officer of the kind required by our unorthodox outfit. He was a medic, but he was also trained as an infantry officer—which was how I would use him until we had some real casualties. "Doctor Fritz," I said. "I want to consult you. Have you ever known a case of a mass topographic hallucination? How is it that a whole group of presumably sane people can imagine they see a forest change in front of their eyes?"

"Can't say, Colonel. But I don't see why we should be much worried. One tree's just as good as another, as far as I'm concerned. Sure, the road's gone, but that isn't much of a loss. You'll have to admit it wasn't any superhighway. Now, I suggest that we just proceed as usual with the maneuvers and some reasonable explanation will turn up before long." We all had another drink on that.

2200 hours. I am writing this last line by flashlight. No plane has come.

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November 25, 1944. 1000 hours. It began to rain in the night, turned to sleet toward morning and quit about dawn. The ground is muddy and Hodge asked permission for the men to light fires. I agreed—but it took an enormous effort of will to overcome a superstitious

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feeling that has suddenly come over me. As if some watcher were out there. I told Hodge that the men could dry out but that the fires had to be extinguished promptly at 0900—because of the expected plane and the camouflage exercise.

That pigeon must have decided to walk. Our headquarters at Columbia is about 30 miles southwest—which is about a two-day march for us cross-country, much less than an hour's flight for a pigeon and about 20 minutes for one of those light planes. Columbia isn't much of a place. As Payson put it, "I'm from Boston and Columbia doesn't do a thing for me. Seven thousand souls perching on limestone cliffs and in imminent peril of sliding into the Duck river." He added, however: "I wouldn't mind seeing it right now, though." We all felt that way. I have written a "Most Urgent" to General Cuyler. Payson is about to release the pigeon.

1300 hours. The third pigeon took off an hour ago. That one might have a mishap is quite possible. That two might fail is unlikely, but it's still a chance. I can't imagine three not making it.

1400 hours. I asked Hodge to report and, when he came, I asked him how the men were.

"A little shook, Colonel. They're wondering what messages them pigeons been carrying."

"I won't kid you, Sergeant. Something's gone wrong with the pigeons. And it's urgent that I get a message through to Columbia as soon as possible." I'd thought this over carefully. It was really Lieutenant Michelson's job, but, for various reasons, I trusted Hodge more in this case. A tough, shrewd, courageous red-neck from the north-Georgia hills can be the best noncom in the Army if he wants to. Or the worst. I wouldn't trust Hodge with a woman, five dollars or a bottle of liquor. There's nobody I'd rather have with me in a fire fight.

"Hodge, take six of your best men and however many mules you need. I want you to head back for Columbia double time. See on the map—you cut across country until you hit the Columbia Pike right here. As soon as you get to a gas station, call in to the motor pool for a couple of vehicles—unless you can flag down an Army truck on the highway. Then get Colonel Wright's reply to my message and drive to Spring Hill. I'll rendezvous with you there tomorrow afternoon." I didn't quite know how to add the last sentence. "And, Hodge—if there's anything wrong at Columbia, just head back to the rendezvous point."

"What do you think might be wrong at Columbia, sir?" Hodge was probing to find out what the official view was. I knew he'd open the message as soon as he safely could.

"Nothing, Sergeant. Now high-tail."

1500 hours. Major Powers is a godsend. It isn't just that he's easy to get along with and knows the terrain. While Hodge is my idea of the best kind of Southern backwoodsman, Powers is what I'd always imagined a real Southern aristocrat to be. He can serve under another man without resentment and command other men without shouting. Along with that, he seems to have a kind of sixth sense about our present odd predicament. He just came to me and suggested that we forgo the usual practice firing this afternoon. I had already decided that, but I was glad that Powers had said it first.

"Bateson," I said, "is there anything you know or that you've noticed that isn't apparent to the rest of us?"

"No," he said. "I've known this country around here all my life. Something odd has happened to it, but I feel that it's basically the same. The hills and the rivers are still in the right places, even though the trees have changed. What spooks me is this ghostly feeling I keep having—I feel something out here that I've never known before."

1800 hours. Instead of going through one of the usual training problems, I left Payson in command and took Powers and Michelson with me on a patrol. We swung west over some rough ground and through a lot of scrub to the little village of Waverly, which marked the western border of our maneuver area. When Powers led us up the knoll overlooking the town, I was sure that all three of us expected it to have vanished —and we were right. We searched the immediate area and found not a trace of roads or foundations. At that point, my greatest worry was Hodge and his men —what kind of an unknown had I sent them into? Once back at the bivouac, I ordered the men to be prepared to move out at 0700 the next morning. We were going to follow a compass course for Spring Hill and move as fast as we could.

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November 26, 1944. 1200 hours. I write this at our noon break. I drove the men hard this morning, but, what with the mud and the cold and the broken country, we didn't make very good time. We have to slow up continually in order to clear paths. Along with that, there are no landmarks Powers can guide by. We did run across some signs of life this morning—an isolated, burned-out cabin and a log bridge across a small stream.

I had Michelson and Powers head up the column, while Payson and I hiked at the rear. I said, "Fritz, have you noticed that each of us reacts in a somewhat different way to this puzzle? It seems to have been a tonic for Michelson. Up to now, he's always gone through the training in a kind of halfhearted way. But since the thing happened, he's suddenly in top form. A real eager beaver."

"Well," Payson said slowly, "George has always been a concealed misfit. He was a kid from a rich family—and if your father happens to be president of one of the big tire companies, people will think you have little failings, but they'll overlook a serious maladjustment. George's only real interest is in blood sports. He's a big-game hunter. He's an expert with just about any kind of small arms you can name. He's been the U.S. saber champion. I doubt if anybody could take him with a knife or at judo—he's superb."

"I see," I said. "You really didn't answer my question, Fritz. But I know what you mean. We've been *playing* war and George has been bored by it. Now, like a hunter animal, he's caught the scent of blood in the wind."

"You said it; I didn't," said Payson, stalking on ahead.

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November 27, 1944. Northern China can't be any worse than middle Tennessee in bad weather. We're bogged down in mud half the time. It balls up on the mules' feet. Swollen streams and thick underbrush have forced a lot of detours and thrown us off course. We are already late for our rendezvous with Hodge. My present thought is to drop the training exercise and hit south for Columbia itself.

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November 28, 1944. 1500 hours. The whole thing must be getting on my nerves. This morning I *did* order a change in the course to head for Columbia. What decided me was something strange within myself. We went into bivouac yesterday around 1530 hours. The men were exhausted and wet through. Twice Payson came to me and requested that the men be allowed to build fires. I wanted to say yes, but something I can't explain held me back. I refused. I do, however, intend to give everybody a three-day pass combined with a weekend as soon as we get straightened out.

1630 hours. We'd finally made it through the worst of the woods and were just about to enter more open country when we heard it—unmistakably, it was the sound of artillery. It came from the direction of Columbia. We stopped in our tracks and Powers and I stared at each other. There was no artillery at Columbia. The only firing range was for small arms. The only units in the vicinity were small infantry combat teams like ours. Then I suddenly saw a strange look of recognition and understanding come over the major's face. He answered my unspoken question. "That

sound comes out of history," he said. "Cannon firing at Columbia."

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November 29, 1944. 1300 hours. We had stopped yesterday just where we were. This morning shortly after dawn, Hodge came into camp. Two of his men were dead and two were wounded and he had a dead stranger with him. The squad was mounted on four fine-looking riding horses and the bodies were strapped onto the backs of three led horses.

The men came running. They began to crowd around the horses, yelling questions, and it took a few minutes to get them under control. Fritz stayed with the wounded men. I took Michelson and Powers aside with me to hear Hodge's report. I gave Hodge the last of my whiskey in a canteen cup and he gulped it down. This is his story, given more or less in his own words:

"We run into a lot of mighty rugged country, and it wasn't till day before yesterday evening we got to Columbia. We heard a few shots, so we crept up on it kind of cautious like, and damn if we didn't see the wildest sight you ever laid eyes on. There was one army just leavin' its positions on the south bank of the Duck and crossin' over. There was another army movin' up from the south—but they didn't attack. We could see the cavalry, the caissons and the old-time cannon. The men said we must of lost our way—and we'd run into a movie outfit makin' a Civil War picture.

"But I *knew* it was Columbia, though it was all different. Just a few muddy streets and frame houses. But the limestone bluffs were the same and the river was the same. Still, I knew it couldn't be. So we lay low that night. Next day we started scoutin' up and down the Duck, keepin' to cover as much as possible. When some more firin' broke out, we headed for Spring Hill, movin' along a dirt road. They spotted us about the same time we spotted them—maybe fifteen, twenty horsemen.

"Well, sir, by this time, I was crazy to know what in hell was goin' on. So I told the boys to get off their mules and I started wavin' to the people down the road. They didn't pay me no mind. They formed up like a cavalry troop, started out at a trot, went into a canter and suddenly they were whoopin' and headin' down on us at a dead run. So there I was out in the middle of the road yellin', 'Hey, MGM or 20th Century-Fox, or whoever the goddamn hell you are, *lay off*. This is the U. S. Army.'

"But those boys weren't playin'. They were carrying big horse pistols and double-barreled shotguns and they looked real mean. They were right on top of us and maybe I would have hesitated still if they hadn't shot our mules right then. We let 'em have it with the choppers. I just didn't have no other choice." He stopped at this point and looked straight into my eyes. "You knew what it was and who it was when you sent us back there, Colonel."

"You're wrong, Hodge," I said. "If I'd known, I wouldn't have sent you."

"It's my fault," said Powers in a quiet voice. "I should have known the answer—or part of it, anyway. Some tremendous natural force has racked us back eighty years in time."

"It can't be," said Hodge. "I was born in 1920. Now you say this here is 1864."

"That dead horse soldier back there," Powers said, "belongs to the cavalry corps of General Nathan Bedford Forrest. We are in the midst of the Civil War."

There was a crazy look on Hodge's face. "Now I know why them boys attacked us!" he said. "They thought we was Yankees!"

"General J. B. Hood commanding," said Powers. "He has given Forrest instructions to clear this area of all hostile forces. You probably looked like creatures from Mars to them, not Yankees—but they were following orders.

"Colonel, may I have your permission to brief this group? My great-grandfather was a general in the War Between the States. His house was not very far from here and he was—will be—killed in battle before long. So, you see, I have a pretty good idea of what is going on.

"Here is the picture. Grant has Lee locked in a vise in Virginia. Sherman has burned Atlanta and is marching to the sea. There is only one Confederate army that can still strike—it is Hood's. He has thirty-eight thousand men; he has come north into Tennessee and he's aiming at Nashville. After that, he has designs on Cincinnati and Chicago. Opposing him is General George Thomas, who is gathering troops at Nashville now. Immediately in front of Hood is his old West Point classmate General John Schofield, with about twenty-two thousand men, at Columbia. Hood is going to cross the river with part of his army and move on Spring Hill this afternoon. That will cut Schofield off from Nashville and put him in a trap."

"*Yippee*," said Hodge.

"Not so fast, Sergeant," said Powers. "Something very strange happens. Something that nobody—participant or scholar—has ever been able to explain. Tonight, General Schofield will march his army away from Columbia, up the

Columbia Pike, and his seventeen thousand men—he has sent one division on ahead—will march practically through the middle of Hood's army and escape unseen."

"Well, *goddamn*," said Hodge.

"Tomorrow, Schofield's army will make a defense of the town of Franklin. Hood will attack him with everything he can muster. And now, gentlemen, you get the second mystery. The charge of the Confederate infantry will become one of the bloodiest disasters of the War. In a little less than five hours, Hood will lose six thousand men. No one has ever been able to explain the massive, unheard-of firepower that the Federals threw against him."

Powers paused and remained silent for at least three minutes. It was obvious that there was a terrible struggle in his mind—and to me it was also obvious that he wanted me, as the commanding officer, to make the next decision. I said, "There is only one answer to the two mysteries. Your implication is plain—the foreknowledge of what will happen plus the incredible firepower of the future. But, Bate, this is not our war."

"It is the history of our country," Powers said. "Look at it this way: Fate is the field marshal of all armies. It has given us a mission."

Hodge had been thinking hard. "Major, are you sayin' that the escape tonight and the battle tomorrow will win the War for the North?"

Powers smiled sadly. "No one ever knows precisely when it was that a war was lost. All I can say is that the South's only striking force will be crippled tomorrow. Hood will lose a great many of his finest officers. What's more, he'll be dealt a terrible psychological blow. At the Battle of Nashville to come, he will behave like a man in a stupor and Thomas will rout his army."

"You and me been brought up a little different, Major," Hodge said. "My daddy taught me two things—one was to hate Yankees and the other was that you ain't lost till you're dead. I figure if we help Hood get loose, he kin raise so much hell that the North will have to come to terms. Maybe he kin burn Chicago!"

"That'll do, Sergeant!" I snapped. "No more of that talk."

"Hodge's face had a remote, calculating look. "Permission to ask a question, sir?" I told him to go ahead. "Where's the colonel from?" he said.

"Wisconsin."

"Does the colonel remember the qualifications a man had to have 'fore he could volunteer for the 656th? Combat veteran, Pacific Theater. Experience with mules. Now, where do you think mule skinners come from? Two thirds of your men are ole country boys from Dixie. No, sir, we ain't gonna save the bacon for some Yankee general. We gonna change history."

"I guess we're sort of engaged. He gave me an urn containing the ashes of his draft card."

"No, Sergeant, you're wrong." The major's voice was sad and quiet.

"But you're from *Tennessee*, sir! You said you grew up around here."

"Tomorrow," Powers said slowly, "the bodies of five Confederate generals will be laid out on my great-grandfather's porch. Fifteen hundred Southern boys will be buried on his farm. It breaks my heart to know this. But tomorrow you will see an even more heartbreaking sight. You will see an army that is the forlorn hope of a dying land. You will see men barefoot and wearing rags. You will see hundreds of wounded men who will die simply because there are no medical supplies. The Confederacy is breathing its last—it's only humane to get the War over with."

Hodge sat slumped down; he shook his head. "My great-grandmother was raped by one of Sherman's men. My great-granddaddy died in a Yankee war prison."

"You're under orders, Sergeant," I said. But I had more important things to do. "Come on, Major. You and I have to brief the men. Michelson, you see that those men in the o.p. are keeping a sharp lookout."

Powers and I stood at the edge of the small clearing. And the men sat in a semicircle. The sun was shining and the November leaves were all bright reds and yellows. It seemed like one of our training classes; it all seemed so normal. Then I began, "Men, that weird change in the forest the other day was actually the sign of. . . ." They listened, tense, motionless, soundless. When I finished, I tried to tell from their faces whether or not they were with me. I couldn't. Then Powers began to explain the military situation. He did it admirably and he ended up by saying some of those same things about the South and our mission in history. He asked if there were any questions. Nobody spoke—then I suddenly noticed their eyes. They were all looking at a point to our left, behind us among the trees.

I started to turn. "Hold it, Colonel. And you, too, Major," Hodge said. He was standing there with his .45 covering our backs.

He took a couple of steps forward and yelled, "You Southerners! You gonna let these Yankee officers make you kill yore own kin? Listen to me! Y'all can change history tomorrow if you want to. I'm goin' to put these Yankees out of action and I'm goin' to join the Stars and Bars. These here machine guns will be on *our* side tomorrow. Every man who's with me, stand up."

"Softly, softly, General Hodge!" Michelson had come quietly up through the trees and now he was standing there, holding an M-3 submachine gun pointed almost carelessly at Hodge's back. "We all have an appointment in Samarra. Only, here in the U. S. A. it's called Appomattox."

Hodge spoke back over his shoulder:

"You got a gun on me, I got a gun on them. Supposin' we both let down and then you and I fight it out fair, Yankee?"

Michelson was enjoying everything enormously. "Marvelous," he said. "All right with you, Colonel? I'll even let you choose your weapons, Hodge."

"Where you from, Yankee?"

"I'm from Chicago, Illinois."

"OK. Then I choose knives. There's nothin' I'd like better than to open you up and see what color a Yankee is inside."

We joined the semicircle. Somehow, under the strange circumstances, this single combat seemed no more bizarre than anything else—but I did make sure that I had Michelson's M-3 under my arm.

Hodge's hand dipped in his pocket and the blade flicked out as he extended his arm. But Michelson was half a second earlier. They crouched and began to circle. Suddenly, Hodge feinted, then his knife came up and he jumped to attack. It was all over in a moment—a weird, tragic moment for me.

Hodge must have learned his knife fighting on country crossroads Saturday nights. He was tough and he was quick. But Michelson had learned his style from the finest of professionals—that was apparent at once. There was another thing. Michelson, given the chance, was a born killer. At the moment he spilled Hodge's guts on the ground, he laughed.

I mourned the brave man who had wanted to kill me and I hated the man who had saved my life.

We all stood spellbound a moment. Then Michelson said, "What I came to tell you, sir, is that a rebel unit has picked up Hodge's trail. Miller has them under observation from the o. p. They're bound to hit us within a half hour." I came to. I began to issue my orders.

Our position was just at the edge of the woods and we occupied a small rise. At the end of the meadow that sloped away from us, I could now see a line of cavalry forming up. It was perfect and beautiful. I could understand why Hodge and his men had thought they were watching a movie being made. Under the bright autumn sun, their colors and their unit guidon snapped in the breeze.

Our array was not nearly so pretty. We were strung along the low ridge, BARs and machine guns on the flanks, mortars to the rear of the clearing in a shallow emplacement.

Far off there in the sunlit meadow, the toy captain raised his toy saber and the line began to move forward. In a short while, they were no longer toys. We listened to the rumble of hooves. Suddenly, when they were halfway across the meadow, the first mortar shells made red-black holes in the perfect gray line.

I heard Powers yelling. "Mortars, hold your fire! We need those horses. BARs and rifles, get the men, but don't hit the horses if you can help it."

The Confederates had not broken stride. They closed ranks beautifully and now their horses were stretching into a dead run. Then came a sound that no living man of our time has ever heard—the rebel yell. I've heard it described as a whoop and as a kind of "Yippee," but actually, it's much akin to that fear-inspiring αλαλη' Alexander taught his phalanx so many centuries ago. I glanced at our line of prone men, silent under their steel helmets, sighting down the barrels of their weapons. I had wondered whether those Southern fingers would pull the triggers. But now my men were being challenged as disciplined soldiers and I knew they would.

I ordered firing to begin at 200 yards. Our automatic-weapons men squeezed off bursts of three, corrected for range and began to riddle the line. I heard Michelson say to the gunners, "Leave the captain for last. None of them must get away." They were 150 yards away. Loose horses were running ahead of and behind the charging line. There were less than 30 men left. At 100 yards, there were less than ten. Then there was one. The captain was still turning his head wildly, in disbelief at the firepower that had demolished his troop in minutes. Our firing stopped as the captain reined up, all alone. At this distance, I could see the bewildered look on his face, the saber sagging down across his saddlebow, the streaks of gray in his brown beard. He was no longer the enemy commander. He was simply a lost, shocked human being. And I knew that none of my men could kill him.

Michelson pitched him out of the saddle with a single shot.

• • •

November 29, 1864. 1500 hours. Then came the hardest part. We had to collect the horses and strip the dead of their uniforms. It was pitiable. The Confederate boots were no more than tatters of leather that clung to the leg and the soles were almost all worn through. The uniforms were hardly uniforms at all—ragged, patched, pieced out with civilian things.

We had a formation and Powers briefed the men. We were to strip off our o.d.s and put them in the fire. The helmets had to be buried deep. For the time being, we were to wear the Confederate clothes, he explained, and later we'd have to change to Union. Only our most essential equipment was to be retained—and all of that carefully hidden under tarpaulins on the mules' backs.

Once we had donned the gray tatters, Powers addressed the men again. He was wearing the dead captain's uniform. He noted that Schofield had now sent the 5000 men under Stanley with his wagon train back to Spring Hill. He said that Hood had now brought half of his army across the Duck and would soon be at Spring Hill. Then the Confederates would bivouac for the night and our job would begin—the job of spiriting Schofield's army safely through.

When Powers asked for questions, a rawboned corporal named Finch got up. "I'm from Mississippi, sir," he said. "I believe I'm speakin' for most of the Southern boys here." I held my breath. "Well, sir," he went on, "we didn't hold none with Hodge. That is, we're loyal to the outfit, to Colonel Gilbert and all. But, sir, we don't see quite why we have to get into this mess. This here Battle of Franklin tomorrow. Now, some of the boys remember hear tell of how they had relatives killed in it. We don't feel much like shootin' our own kin. So we're wonderin' if maybe the colonel wouldn't turn us loose, them as wants to go. We'd swear on the Bible not to jine up with Hood. We'd jist keep out'n the whole squabble and head west. If we shoot anybody, it'll be Indians."

"Tomorrow some of my kin will die, too," said Powers. "Your decision, Colonel."

I began. "Well, I've thought about it and I believe it's only just to give you a choice. But first let me say this. We are lost forever. Our world has vanished into the mist of the future. Your wives, sweethearts, children will not be born for some sixty years hence. Your comrades in this outfit are the only family you have. Your ancestors out there could never accept you—we are strangers from an unborn age.

"Still, I know your feelings. I am going to order all of you to stick together as a unit. Tomorrow, when the shooting starts, those who do not wish to fire have my permission to take shelter and try to survive. Then you can start west, if you like. There is no use in anyone's heading out tonight. In Confederate uniform, he'd be shot as a deserter; in Union blue, he'd be shot even faster." I was surprised to find that only about 15 of our 70 men took the noncombatant way out.

As Powers, Michelson and I rode at the head of the column toward Spring Hill, we compared a few personal notes. Michelson spoke with an eager zest. "This is the age for me! I couldn't be happier. I found the 20th Century pretty depressing on the whole—and I had no ambition to die in Hankow or whatever. Think of it! There's gold in California. In the next few decades, Morgan and Vanderbilt and Whitney will be making their millions. And with what I know, I'm going to live a full life, believe me!"

Powers said, "I have no more feel-

ings. My only interest is in keeping the record straight. John, when the dust has settled, I want you to finish that journal you've been keeping. And then I want to bury it as a kind of time capsule to be found someday after 1944. I want our families to know what happened to all of us."

I said, "Agreed. After that, I think I'll move on up to Wisconsin. Get me a homestake out in the woods somewhere and retire. I don't have much interest in life after this." But I knew that, in fact, we'd all be dead. There was no other possibility.

• • •

November 30, 1864. 1100 hours. We are now dug in before Franklin and I have a chance to fill in this journal. Last night, we moved along a dirt road through hilly, wooded terrain toward Spring Hill. Units of Jackson's corps were moving up and no one paid any special attention to us. Spring Hill is a hub for roads, however, and when the roads began to converge, we passed alongside a brigade of Hood's infantry and we looked at them curiously.

Most of them appeared to be less than 20 years old. Their footwear was burlap, their uniforms were nondescript rags. All carried a blanket rolled over one shoulder and tied together under the opposite arm. Most of them had the long, muzzle-loading rifles, but a few, I noted, carried the Sharps rifle. All wore the Johnny Reb caps. They slogged along in great good humor.

"If'n you ain't the purtiest bunch of bloodied-up hossmen I ever did see," yelled one of them. "How'd you happen to git so near the fightin'?"

One of our Southern boys said, "Does yore momma know where you're at?"

"Not since Missionary Ridge, she don't. But you git me leave an' I'll be right proud to tell her." Laughter.

"Where y'all been?" another one yelled. "Butcherin' hawgs?"

"Yankee hawgs," said one of ours and there was more laughter.

We saluted their commanding officer. "You are part of Cleburne's division?" Powers asked.

"Sixteenth Alabama," said the officer, "and I'd give anything to know where *he* is."

"I happen to know that he's at Spring Hill," said Powers. "The Yankee wagons and about five thousand men are there."

As we got closer to the town, we began to hear occasional firing. We took a side road—Powers confidently in the lead—and skirted away from the battlefield. Then we took a path that led up to a wooded vantage point somewhat west of the town. Here we stayed concealed while we had a dinner of K rations. The four of us officers scanned the area through field glasses.

I was fascinated to see a Civil War scene laid out, as if in miniature, below

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us. In the town—actually, no more than a village—we could see the Union wagon train drawn up. Just on the edge of the houses was the uneven line of defenses, a hasty improvisation of shallow trench and whatever had come to hand for breastworks. Now and then we saw a puff of black powder, but there was no steady firing.

"And to think that I once lectured on this campaign before the Nashville Historical Society," Powers said. "I still can't help thinking I'm dreaming all this."

"When does the attack come?" Payson asked.

"There won't be any this afternoon," Powers said. "I never quite understood before why Hood held off from destroying the supply train at Spring Hill. But now I can understand. It's just too late to organize anything." It was true. The short day was already darkening. Confederate cavalry units reconnoitered the Federal lines and a few skirmishers in gray exchanged shots with the defenders, but there was no concentration of forces. "Look there!" said Powers, pointing to the south. In the distance, we could see a dark host, the main body of Hood's army moving up. "Do you see that large woods there alongside the pike? That's where Hood will bivouac tonight. And we must join him."

We gave the town a wide berth, crossed the pike as it was getting dark and entered the woods. We were just in time. Hood's advance units began filtering into the trees shortly afterward.

We made camp in a clump of trees a quarter mile from the pike, picketed our mules and horses and made fires, just as Hood's men were doing. There was unbelievable confusion. No one paid attention to us. They were exhausted and interested only in eating and getting to sleep. Soon, the entire woods was filled with men, as unit after unit chose a spot and made a camp.

There were small fires everywhere and men scrounging for firewood. Here and there were loud greetings. Throughout the woods was a steady murmur of voices. Couriers on horseback galloped to and fro, ascertaining where the various command posts were being set up. It was weird, chilling.

Powers gathered us closely around him. "There are three major actions we have to perform," he said. "First, one of us must get a Union uniform, ride south down the pike toward Columbia and get word to General Schofield that the pike will be clear by the time he gets here. This is a dangerous mission——"

"I'll take it," said Michelson. "I saw where the Union people at the wagons were laying out their dead. I'll get my uniform there."

Powers took the field-message kit from the saddlebag of the Confederate captain whose clothes he wore. He wrote out an order as if it were being originated by General George Thomas, commander of the Union forces at Nashville.

> You are caught between two sections of Hood's army. Your situation is desperate and requires desperate measures. I am sending a company of daring men to kill Hood's pickets and clear the pike. The plan has a chance because of the exhaustion of Hood's men. You are to begin marching upon receipt of this order from Lieutenant Michelson. After delivering this message, he is to gallop back and have your supply wagons ready to depart by the time you arrive at Spring Hill.
>
> Signed: General George Thomas

"Thomas couldn't possibly have sent this message," said Powers. "But Schofield doesn't know that." He sealed the message and handed it to Michelson. "Make it stick, George."

My own mission was to take charge of the remainder of the men, form them into commando teams and, after the Confederates were asleep, patrol the pike. We were to kill every picket or anyone close enough to the pike to see the Union army as it passed.

As for Powers, he took two horses and a corporal to accompany him. "Forrest's cavalry are straddling the pike about three miles over there—north of Spring Hill. Ordinarily, it would be their job to interdict the road. I am going to carry an order from Hood saying that Forrest can bivouac his men and that Brown's division will be responsible for securing the road.

"Later tonight, despite all your efforts, someone is going to see the Union army passing. There will be a small alarm. Hood sends General Johnson to investigate. Johnson's unit is nearest the pike." He turned and pointed. It was the division nearest us. "As a matter of fact, you can see his tent over there about two hundred yards. I will be the courier who delivers that message to Johnson. I will send the man who accompanies me to warn you that the general is coming. When you receive that word, you and your men move up and down the Union column and pass the word for them to lie in the ditch on the opposite side of the pike until further notice. You'll have to be in Union uniforms by then.

"I suggest that now, while it's early, you send a detail to get those uniforms. Be sure to get uniforms for my man and me. When I return from escorting General Johnson back to his quarters after he's inspected the pike, all will be clear. We then join the Union army and march to Franklin. Any questions?"

"Must we kill those pickets?"

"Not only kill them but bury them and camouflage the graves. I know how you feel, but tell yourself these men have in actual fact been dead eighty years."

Powers chose his man and faded into the darkness.

I divided the men into teams of threes. We improvised garrotes from tent ropes. I showed those who weren't familiar with this method of murder how it was performed. There was a garrote man in each threesome. Once he had the rope around the victim's neck, the other two were to hold the victim down so that struggle would be at a minimum.

Payson took another commando team to get the uniforms. They had blackened their faces and stripped down to just a few essential pieces of dark clothes. They had to enter the Union lines, a problem made less difficult by the fact that we'd had a chance to study the defenses through our field glasses earlier in the day. Then they had to find the wagons carrying uniform supplies. It seemed to me that this might be a place where the whole scheme would go wrong, but that was not to be. Payson left in the dark: by the time he came back there was still no moon, but a hazy mist of starlight gave the landscape some visibility. He reported the job done with hardly a hitch—only one Union sentry had to be disposed of. Now, by the dull gleam of the campfire embers, the 656th undressed, became transformed from a ragged gray unit to a wrinkled but fully wrapped blue one.

By 2200 hours, the pickets had been cleared along the road—there had, thank God, been only a few men to get out of the way. The other campfires had died down to coals. It was very quiet, but the forest seemed to breathe with the heavy slumber of the exhausted army. When Michelson came back, he was walking his horse not on the hard-surfaced pike but on the grassy verge. Nevertheless, I could hear him some minutes before he arrived. He reported in a whisper that all was well.

Then came the sight that history has never explained. They were coming—an endless line of marching men, eight or ten in a rank, covering the width of the pike. They were moving as carefully as they could, but no army is soundless. The head of the column came past my post, with just an occasional clink of canteen or muffled clatter of equipment. Half an hour went by. We waited tensely for the incident. Then it came.

A sleepy Johnny Reb came out of the woods to urinate. He did not see the masses of blue on the pike but, suddenly, there was the clank of some piece of equipment and he turned dazedly and sighted the ghost army. My men were strung out along the line of march and I saw two of them rise to catch him, but he recovered his senses and was gone back into the woods.

But my men had been briefed and they were ready. They rose up in their groups of three and passed along this whole sector of the line, giving the

officers the warning. Miraculously, there was little confusion. The column moved off the pike to the meadows and the far side and sank onto the ground. Suddenly, the route that had been choked with a mighty army looked empty in the faint, dim light.

That was the way it was when the Confederate General Johnson—cursing and grumbling at the fool who was seeing ghosts in the night—rode out of the woods to take a look. Riding with him were two aides—and even at this distance, I was sure I could recognize which was Powers. They stopped some hundred yards from the road, the general's voice going on in angry tones for a minute or two after he had discerned no sight of the enemy. With Powers seeming to urge him, the horses wheeled and the party rode back to the encampment.

When General Johnson lay down again to sleep, Hood's last chance had gone. He was doomed. In the morning, he would awake and discover his error. Hood is a fine leader, but he is also a man with a high temper. Tomorrow, that temper would make him blind and deaf.

• • •

December 24, 1864. Nashville, Tennessee. Major Bateson Powers writing. With heavy heart on this forlorn Christmas Eve, I take up the chronicle where John left off. Colonel Gilbert is dead. But I must keep faith with him and finish the record, because it was the one thing he cared about.

On the southern outskirts of the little town of Franklin, there are two houses: the Carter house and the Gin house. Just to the east of them is the Harpeth river and just between them is a narrow, U-shaped pocket where the Lewisburg Pike dips into the town proper. It was on this narrow front, on the morning of November 30, that the 656th set up its sandbagged emplacements and its shrouded machine guns. We were somewhat isolated from the Ohio regiment on our right and the Minnesota regiment on our left. John decided that we'd forgo the use of bazookas or mortars—the expenditure of ammunition in our maneuvers had left us a few rounds only. Instead, we had a front line of automatic weapons. Behind that, in support, there was a shallow trench where our few riflemen and men armed with M-3 submachine guns waited in support. Colonel Gilbert commanded the front line; Michelson, the support trench; and Captain Payson, with his Southerner noncombatants as stretcher-bearers, set up his aid station in the cellar of the Carter house.

Before the battle, John gathered us and made a little speech. It was short and simple, mainly a matter of thanks and goodbyes. At the end, he said that he was leaving a record of our experiences that he hoped would come to light in the 20th Century and be published and read by many Americans. He said that the Civil War had become a part of romantic literature—and that our true story would serve to remind Southerners and Northerners alike how tragic and bloody it is when one half of a nation quarrels with the other half.

Then he ordered me not to take part in the battle. My assignment would be to gather all the modern weapons and destroy them when the battle was over. Not a trace was to be left.

I observed that battle, and every detail is burned into my memory, but I do not have the heart to describe it at any length. There was the initial Confederate success—routing two brigades of Federal troops that had been too slow to take shelter in the defenses—and the seizure of some trenches held by a raw regiment from Ohio. But success ended there. The action began around 1600 hours and all the rest of that short afternoon, Hood flung his lines of gray infantry against a storm of steel. The Federal batteries across the river ripped the Southern ranks. They wavered, mended themselves again and swept down against us. The machine guns heaped them in the meadows in front of our position. I counted 13 separate assaults.

But their fire, though not nearly as massed as that of the 656th, cut down our own men slowly but surely. When one of the charges threatened to overwhelm our front line, the men with submachine guns would stand up and break it. Inevitably, we lost a few men each time. At the end, Michelson and Colonel Gilbert themselves were manning guns. Even Payson and the medics had been cut down.

Now dusk came. My last sight of Gilbert and Michelson came in the dark, as they were illuminated by a flash now and then. They were out of ammunition and they were pitching the last remaining hand grenades at what was to be the last charge of the battle. They must have been killed at very nearly the same time.

In the smoky dusk, I made my way over the bodies of the 656th, collecting all of the weapons. We had with us a crate of the composition C-3, a puttylike explosive for demolition. This I had molded around our weapons before I dropped them into the well of the Gin house. Then I unwound a long spool of primer cord and strung it down the hill. The explosion of the Gin-house well was

"That settles it, Irma. No more timesaving household appliances for you!"

the last sound of the battle of Franklin.

I collected a few pieces of metal after the explosion and then I began to trudge. That night, I slept under the porch of my great-grandfather's house, the house where I had often stayed as a boy. Later that night, I heard the men laying out the bodies of five Confederate generals on the porch above my head.

My great-grandmother must have had another queer experience the next morning—unless she was beyond shock by this time. She heard a noise in the early morning and she arose, taking the old horse pistol from the fireplace as she went. When she looked out of her window, she saw a strange Yankee officer, cap off, head bowed, staring at the five dead men. Staring particularly at the face of her own husband. And, strangest of all, there were tears running down the cheeks of that Yankee officer. I like to think that she may have noticed my family resemblance before I turned away.

• • •

March 3, 1865. I have dug a shallow quarter basement and laid the foundation with my own hands, and I shall put down the floor without aid. A carpenter and his helper will be here next week to build the frame. I have selected this site with care—it is near Nashville and yet not too near so that I am bothered by curious passers-by. My hope is that the building will be razed and this journal discovered in time for the 656th's next of kin to learn the fate of their men. As closely as I can calculate, the suburbs of Nashville should reach this area sometime in the 1950s or 1960s.

I have two small, stout chests. Into one I shall put the papers—this notebook, plus copies of those orders I have been able to save. There is a copy of the false message I sent to General Schofield and a copy of the one I delivered to Forrest. In the other chest go those chunks of modern metal—the only remains of the 656th's weapons that were not buried in the well. I put them there as an additional proof. May God protect these papers from rot and mildew. They are the only grave marker for a group of brave men who died in one of the strangest impossibilities of history.

A great weight has fallen on me now. All during the action, I could be somewhat objective. I could remember the decree of history on the Confederacy and I could remember that I was an officer of the Army of the United States. In retrospect, it is different. I have seen the ranks of my own people torn apart by machine guns. I have seen the dead face of my great-grandfather. When the warehouse is finished, I shall kill myself. But now I have to work on the floor.

• • •

I, Howard Jamison, finished reading the chronicle and slowly returned to the present in a state of dazed belief. As a historian, I find it peculiarly distressing to be absolutely convinced of the truth of something that is clearly impossible.

"Son, why don't you bring some of the New Left home for Cokes and cookies?"

Nevertheless, Hanson and I set about to see what verification we could get by means of the materials. In brief, the results were: Analysis of the chronicle notebook paper showed that (as I had suspected) it contained an acid bleaching agent that was not in use until the 20th Century. Testing showed that the messages were written—also in the handwriting of Bateson Powers—on paper that must have been manufactured in the 1860s. The fused chunks of metal from the weapons contained molybdenum—which was not used in steel alloys until the 1900s.

When the results were in at last, I could see only one thing to do—that was to smoke out the Pentagon. Having served in two wars, I know the military bureaucratic mind and I know that direct methods would bring me up against a stone wall of secrecy. Fortunately, I am a rather well-known professor at a great university, an occasional guest at some fairly top-level Washington parties and (when necessary) a man with a modicum of low cunning.

All three stood me in good stead. I called Claire Hudson: a week later, at the dinner table of her Foxhall Road house, I was telling my story to an audience that could only be described as "influential" Washington. The *Post* and the *Star* were not there, but I was willing to bet that their columnists would have the story within a few hours. In fact, I could see from the faces around me that my tale was going to be something of a sensation.

When the telephone call came the next afternoon, it wasn't, however, quite what I expected. It was not from the Pentagon: the voice identified the caller as Patrick Tolliver—who simply invited me, in the politest way possible, to call on him at his White House office. Tolliver is, of course, the ranking Presidential aide, the Sherman Adams of this Administration.

He was very pleasant in our first interview. He said that he'd had reports of a rather incredible story I was supposed to be telling around town. He said that I'd undoubtedly been misquoted and that he'd simply wanted to hear the truth about it from me. He said that, quite apart from his own personal interest in history, there was a matter of some insinuation about the Pentagon's suppressing the news of a military disaster of World War Two. What, exactly, had my remarks been?

"I was telling the story of the 656th Regimental Combat Team, which disappeared in its entirety on November 24, 1944, while on maneuvers in Tennessee. Just recently, there have been discovered some documents that disclose the fate of those men. I have photostats of the papers here for your examination. You will also find reports on certain test results."

That was the end of our first talk. Two days later, I was called back. This time, Tolliver began by saying, "What

do you want of us, Dr. Jamison? What would you expect the Government to do if these papers were proved to be genuine?"

"I want a full and complete public disclosure of all information in Government records concerning the 656th. I suppose there will be some red faces at the Pentagon, but you shouldn't let that deter you."

He stared out the window. "What if I told you that the papers were faked—a very clever hoax, much better than that Viking rune stone they found in Minnesota. . . ."

"I should," I said quietly, "know that you were lying. I intend to publish the papers."

He turned back to me. "Yes, I would be lying. The papers are all true. Or, at least, they are the only answer to something that has been a top-secret mystery through five Administrations." He brought out a large gray official folder and, opening it, said, "All but a very few people believe that the first atomic test was carried out at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945. Actually, there was an earlier test of a much more primitive atomic device in 1944. An area in western Tennessee was cleared, but such was the secrecy of the Manhattan Project that Army G-3 didn't have a chance of learning about the test. Thus it was that the 656th happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The device was triggered by radio on the twenty-fourth. . . ." Tolliver's voice trailed off.

"You see, nobody knew quite what to expect. When the carrier pigeon from the 656th failed to arrive on the twenty-fourth, a search team trailed them in. All they ever found were some ammunition cases. Can you imagine what that implied for the scientists? It seemed that an atomic explosion had the incredible effect of making human beings vanish off the earth without leaving a trace. It was staggering."

"I am very sorry, Mr. Tolliver," I said. "All of this is fascinating. It *must* be told, as a part of our history. And I fail to see why it now must remain suppressed so many years later. Surely, this wild freak, this unique atomic effect, is no longer a secret of any importance?"

"On the contrary," he answered. "It is our official reason for keeping the whole affair classified Top Secret. It is my official reason for asking you to hand over all objects and papers having to do with your discovery. It is my reason for warning you not to publish any of your findings. If you do, I think you will find yourself quite discredited."

I gasped. I rose in anger. "You are burying the truth! You are distorting history. You as much as admit this is no substantial reason—it's just an 'official' one!"

"Please, Dr. Jamison," said Tolliver in a quiet voice. He waited for my anger to subside a little. At last I sat down. He leaned forward and, in a low voice, he said, "I'm not attempting to deceive you, Dr. Jamison. I am going to tell you the real reason—it is very simple. Do you remember the pull of loyalties Major Powers went through? Do you realize that recent political events have split North and South in feeling more than at any time since Reconstruction? Can you imagine the feelings of all of the families of the men in the 656th? Their soldiers enlisted to fight the enemies of the United States—and they ended up in Yankee uniforms killing their own kin? Can you imagine the headlines in Montgomery, Richmond or Atlanta? I think you will answer those questions as Bateson Powers would."

He shook hands with me as I was leaving. "Oh, by the way," he said in a near whisper, "the President has seen those papers. They gave him a sleepless night."

Tolliver is a very persuasive man. I had been had. Clio, the eternal spirit of Historic Truth, had been had. But, somehow, I did not really feel guilty.

Where will it all end?
Lots of cigarettes are going to great lengths for extra