

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	11
<i>August 1882</i>	15
1 Over the Mountain	17
2 Daily Bread	23
3 Through the Valley	31
4 Wife of My Youth	37
5 Answering the Call	47
6 The Hour of Trial	53
7 Fall of the Mighty	63
8 Requiem	69
9 The Dark Times	75
10 Bugs and the Band	85
11 Trudge to the Rappahannock	93
12 A Carol for Caroline Street	105
13 Plain of the Dead	115
14 The Endless Night	127
15 Tears in the Yuletide	139
16 General Decline	153

17	General Renewal	163
18	A Grand Design	171
19	The Inn at the Crossroad	183
20	A Knock on the Head	195
21	Northward Bound	207
22	Northward Bound Again	217
23	Bliss	229
24	Dust and Ashes	243
25	New Recruits	255
26	Dry Powder	265
27	Back to the Enemy	273
28	Winter Quarters	285
29	Eye to Eye	295
30	A Season in the Wilderness	303
31	The Mule Shoe	315
32	Assault at Cold Harbor	327
33	Her Husband's Crown	337
34	Unto the Mountains	345

Over the Mountain

*Why art thou cast down, O my soul?
and why art thou disquieted within me?*

PSALM 42:11

GENERAL RENO'S CORPSE WAS THE FIRST I SAW DURING THE war. As the hour approached midnight on Sunday, September 14th, 1862, the thoroughly winded green recruits, among which I was proud to be numbered, crested South Mountain at Turner's Gap. The march from Frederick, Maryland, had been long and hot, with few breaks for coffee and rations. When, during the course of the afternoon, the men heard the din of fighting erupt, and when they saw battle smoke enshroud the long ridge ahead of them, each untested man looked about at his mates. He saw jaws clenched, faces drawn, skin pallid, and eyes wide with fear and uncertainty, countenances that mirrored his own.

With nightfall the battle clamor ebbed, then stopped altogether as the men toiled up the mountain toward the gap. All were eager to end the day with a hot cup of coffee and a peaceful night's sleep.

An ambulance was parked in the grass next to the road. A mule hitched to the front of it stamped nervously as we passed. At the rear of the ambulance a single torch of pitch blazed and

AN EYE FOR GLORY

a lone soldier stood guard, head low to his chest, stoop shouldered. He stirred at our approach, raising his head slowly, as if with great effort.

"What unit you boys with?"

"Fourteenth Connecticut Volunteer Infantry of French's Division," someone answered.

The sentinel stood with his back to the torchlight, his black slouch hat pulled low, casting his visage deeply in the shadow of the half moon. He appeared a faceless phantom, breathing and moving as one of the living, but when he spoke, his voice was hollow and lifeless.

"Did you hear about General Reno?" He waved at the ambulance behind him.

No one said a word.

"Major General Jesse Lee Reno—a great patriot, a soldier's soldier, a true fighting man, not like some of these other dandies we have. We loved him like a father." The man spat at the ground. "Now he's dead." The man shook an upraised fist at the darkness to the south. "My general. He's dead and I wouldn't believe it unless I'd seen it myself. We'd already whipped those devils, but they just shot him down as they turned to run." The man lowered his head to his chest again, his voice a murmur. "He died with the setting of the sun."

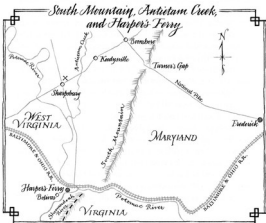
Still none of us had any words for him. Our feet began to shuffle forward, leaving the sentinel to resume his mournful vigil.

"The night will be long and dark," he called to anyone within earshot. "What will become of us now?"

A few minutes later we came upon a large field. Gasps of horror arose from the column as spectral shadows flitted from place to place about the starlit meadow. But as our eyes adjusted, the shadowy figures turned out to be some of our own troops. There had been a great and bloody fight upon that mountain and

our boys had won it, but there had been many casualties, both Union and Confederate. Burial details worked by torchlight on both sides of the road, moving from one black heap to another, checking for any signs of life before tagging the body for interment. The bodies of our Federal comrades would be the first to be retrieved. If time and will allowed it, the enemy dead would also be buried, albeit in cursory fashion. Otherwise, their corpses would be left to the elements and their rotting flesh would see yet another battle, this time between the birds of the air or the beasts of the field which would carry off the choicest parts.

The regiment was ordered off the road to camp for the night in this field of death. We moved slowly among the corpses,



AN EYE FOR GLORY

carefully trying not to stumble over them in the darkness or tread on any flailed appendage. Some of the men were fortunate to find enough room to spread out their rubber blankets and build campfires, but for most, the stiffening, bloating corpses of the enemy dead had to be moved aside and even stacked one upon the other to clear sufficient space. It was the first time I had seen dead bodies like that. I had been to several memorial services in our church, but the body of the deceased was always someone known to us, possibly a loved one, and the body was always laid out carefully in a simple coffin, making it easy for the viewer to imagine the person asleep rather than dead. But in that field, the pale moonlight revealed the bodies of those pitiable soldiers to be grotesquely contorted in every imaginable way, a terrible testament to the agonies suffered in the last moments of their struggles with death.

"Michael?" John Robinson, my closest and dearest friend since childhood, was by my side, as he had been during the last seven days of hard marching from Fort Ethan Allen. "Could you ever have imagined this just six weeks ago?"

"No, I never . . . I thought . . . I don't know what I thought it would be like. War means killing, but this is so . . . terrible."

John and I roamed the field in search of an unspoiled place.

"Here, this looks all right," John said. "It's soft and grassy and the closest body is a few yards away."

We began to unroll our rubber blankets. "Nobody forced us into this," John said. "We volunteered. We talked about it over and over." John paused for a response, but I offered none. "Are we still agreed that it's God's will for us to be here?"

"Yes, you heard me say it. Reverend Preston was most convincing about the evils of slavery."

"Easy to say in church on Sunday. But what about here and now?"

"I know, John. Death is suddenly so close — I'm face-to-face

with it. I can reach out and touch it, feel it reaching out to touch me.”

“Unless we crawl under a rock, staring death in the face is something we’ll have to get used to. That will be my prayer tonight, that God will calm and steady me.”

Perhaps the worst was the smell of the freshly dead. The sickly sweet odor of blood spilled upon the ground and the more powerful stench of bodies blown apart with their entrails cast to the four winds combined in a reeking aroma that, perhaps even more than sight, spoke sickening volumes of the gore all around. As I lay on my blanket, I could look only upward at the heavenly host above me, or I could close my eyes tightly shut against the hideous specter of those bodies, but I could not shut out the smell. I turned over, face downward to the earth, and tried to will myself to sleep. I buried my face in the crook of my elbow, hoping the odors of earth and grass and India rubber would crowd out the sickening odor of death. At last, I remembered the words of the psalmist and repeated them over and over until they grew into a drumbeat for my troubled heart, *Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night . . . Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night . . . Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night . . .*

For Union soldier Michael Palmer, surviving war is only half the battle

Michael is a good man, a family man. But honor and duty push him to leave his comfortable life and answer the call from Abraham Lincoln to fight for his country.

This "citizen soldier" learns quickly that war is more than the battle on the field. Long marches under extreme conditions, illness, and disillusionment challenge him at every turn. Faith seems lost in a blur of smoke and blood ... and death. Michael's only desire is to kill as many Confederate soldiers as he can so he can go home. He coldly counts off the rebels that fall to his bullets. Until he is brought up short by a dying man holding up his Bible.

It's in the solemn aftermath of the battle at Gettysburg that Michael begins to understand the grave cost of the war upon his soul. Here the journey really begins as he searches for the man he was and the faith he once held so dearly. With the help of his beloved wife, Jessie Anne, Michael takes the final steps toward redemption and reconciliation.

Using firsthand accounts of the 14th Connecticut Infantry, author Karl Bacon has crafted a detailed, genuine, and compelling novel on the 150th anniversary of the Civil War.

Intensely personal and accurate to the times, culture, and tragedy of the Civil War, *An Eye for Glory* may change you in ways you could have never imagined.



KARL BACON is a first-time novelist and long-time student of the Civil War. He and his wife, Jackie, live in Naugatuck, Connecticut.

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Cover Design: Janna Hall

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ISBN 978-0-310-32023-3



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