

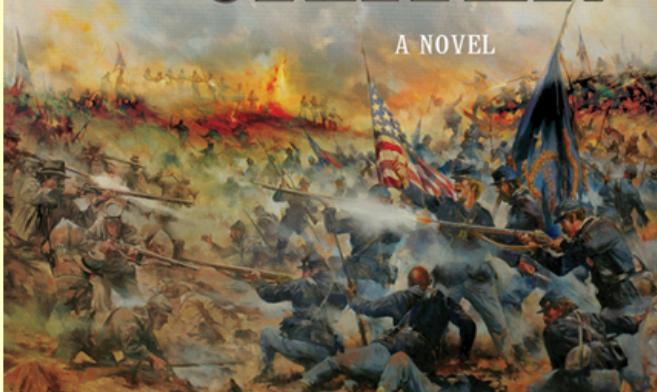
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WILLIAM R. FORSTCHEN**

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**BATTLE OF
THE CRATER**

A NOVEL



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CHAPTER ONE

ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

JUNE 6, 1864

THE ESTATE OF GENERAL ROBERT E. LEE

DAWN

“HERE THEY COME, PARSON.”

Sergeant Major Garland White, 28th United States Colored Troops, turned from his labors and looked to where Jeremiah Smith, a private from Company A, was pointing north to the road leading down from the “Iron Bridge” across the Potomac.

It had been raining most of the night, a slow steady drenching downpour out of the east. It had done little to drop the temperature and now added to the misery of the men of the 28th who had been out toiling by lantern light since midnight. The Potomac was concealed beneath coiling fog and mists rising up from the river, shrouding the capital city on the opposite shore.

The first of a long line of ambulances, emerging out of the mists, was drawn by two mules, ghostlike in the morning light, followed by another and another, mud splashing up from the hooves of the mules and the wheels of the wagons.

“Back to it, Jeremiah. I want it dug straight.”

"Ain't no difference, parson, we be filling it back up shortly."

He put a fatherly hand on Jeremiah's shoulder, guiding him back to the hole, seven feet by three and supposedly six feet deep.

"It's not parson, it's sergeant major now," Garland said. "Do as you are ordered; back down there you go."

Jeremiah looked at him sullenly, as Garland released his hold on Jeremiah and reached down to lend a hand to Private Thompson, who had finished his half hour stint in the hole.

"Come on, Willie, take a quick break, there's hot coffee under the tarp." He helped the private, covered head to foot in warm clinging mud, out of the ground and pointed to where the regimental cooks had ten-gallon vats of the brew waiting.

"Thank ya, Reverend . . . I mean, Sergeant Major, sir."

"I'm a sergeant major, not a sir, save that for . . . the officers." He almost said, "your boss man," but caught himself.

Taking Willie's shovel, he handed it to Jeremiah and helped him slip down into the hole.

"Hurry it up, men," Garland announced, stepping back, his voice carrying to the rest of the regiment. "They're almost here, and I want this done right and proper now."

"Sergeant Major, damn it, it's like trying to shovel out the Wabash River."

Garland turned, struggling to control his anger as he gazed down at Corporal Turner in the next hole over. He bent over at the waist, fixing the corporal with an icy gaze.

"Corporal Turner," he hissed, voice pitched low, remembering it was not proper to reprimand another noncommissioned officer in front of the men, or the officers for that matter. "I will not tolerate profanity in my presence. Next, I will not tolerate profanity on this ground, which is consecrated and . . ."

He hesitated.

"Damn it, I will not tolerate beefing from someone who is supposed to lead. If you don't like that, Corporal, you can climb out of there right now, take off those two stripes, and I'll find someone else to wear them."

He gazed down at the mud-drenched corporal.

“Do I make myself clear, Corporal, or is it Private?”

“Yes, Sergeant Major.”

“You can stay down there and keep digging until I tell you different.”

Turner said nothing, though the next shovelful up, containing more water than muddy earth, landed within inches of Garland's feet.

Garland turned away and noticed that young Lieutenant James Grant was looking his way. The lieutenant gave a nod of approval and turned away, going back under the tarpaulin where the officers of the regiment had gathered while the men labored.

Grant had wanted to “dig in” with the rest of the men of his company. As the detail started their labors in the pouring rain, however, Garland heard Colonel Charles Russell, commander of their regiment, restraining Grant, saying that this was an enlisted man's job, besides, the lieutenant had to keep his uniform relatively unspoiled for the brief ceremony which would commence in a few minutes. Grant was a good man, a three-year veteran of the war, who at heart still acted as if he were a sergeant. He led by example and Garland deeply respected him for that, even though he was not much more than a lad of twenty.

He left Turner's hole, and continued down the long line—a long line of seventy-one graves.

Seventy-one graves for seventy-one men—men who had died the previous day in the dozen military hospitals that ringed the city of Washington. Seventy-one graves for men wounded in the grueling campaign, which had started exactly one month ago today, on May 6th. Seventy-one graves for men transported back across rutted roads and aboard hospital ships from the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, the North Anna, and according to the newspaper reports, a new battlefield just six miles short of Richmond at a place called Cold Harbor. Graves for men who had survived all that, only to die in Washington and now be buried here.

Garland's regiment had come to this city from Indianapolis at the beginning of May. Five months of training had prepared them for combat, for battles that every last man of them longed for, a chance to prove themselves, a chance to show that they were of the

same blood as their comrades with the 54th Massachusetts. They wanted to show that they were as worthy of the honor of serving as any other citizen, white or black, and that they were therefore worthy of the rights of freemen.

Across the cold months of drills during their winter of recruitment and mobilization back in Indiana, Garland had joined their ranks as the "parson," but had soon earned the coveted chevrons of a sergeant major, the highest rank a colored man could hold in this army. In their nightly prayer services, he had dwelled again and again on Psalm 91, calling it the soldier's psalm, and entreated his men to memorize it to prepare themselves for the battles to come. He had promised them battle, and they were eager for it, as ready as any regiment had ever been.

On the day they arrived in Washington, he had still promised it. They detrained and marched down Pennsylvania Avenue to the cheers of the colored in the city and many of the white folks as well.

And then they had been marched here, to this place called Arlington, the plantation once owned by General Lee. Muskets had been stacked, they had been handed shovels, and told to dig—not fortifications, but graves.

He had cajoled them, told them that to do this fittingly was an honor while they waited for the call to join the army on the front lines. That was a month ago—a long month of a dreadful routine. Each evening a telegram would be sent over, informing the colored troops of this and of two other regiments stationed here how many graves were to be dug during the night, in preparation for the funeral train of mule-drawn ambulances that would arrive at dawn.

The digging was done during the night so that this grisly task and the horrific numbers could at least in some way be concealed. That had been obvious to all of them. Bring the dead out quietly; put them in the ground quietly. The number this morning was typical, not as bad as the week after the Wilderness, when the daily number had been a hundred or more. Tonight was seventy-one graves, a typical night for those who died in Washington, and only one regiment, his regiment, had drawn the detail. Only the good Lord knew how many were being buried up on the front lines.

There were rumors afloat that three days ago, up in front of Richmond, it had numbered in the thousands.

Once the graves were filled and covered over, the men would be paraded back to their barracks. First, clean the mud-drenched uniforms, then breakfast. Most of the men of Garland's regiment had been freemen living around Indianapolis when the regiment was mobilized last December and were used to hard labor. As for those who had escaped from bondage, the labor was typical of any day in slavery, but a breakfast of fried salt pork, grits, fresh bread or hard-tack, and coffee, *real* coffee—not the slave brew of chickory and various roots—was an absolute luxury. But for men who had trained for and had expected war, morale was at rock bottom.

After breakfast they would be allowed six hours of sleep, then fall out for inspection, and a few hours drill. Then the next telegram would arrive, reporting how many graves were to be dug that night. Muskets would be exchanged for shovels and picks, and then they would march down to what had once been the front lawn of Robert E. Lee's family home.

The rain came down in a steady, warm flow; not at all refreshing. Rivulets of muddy water were pouring off the piled-up earth by each grave, following the laws of gravity, and thus flowing over the lips of the graves and cascading onto the drenched kepis, upturned collars, and backs of the laboring men.

Their regimental commander, Colonel Russell, stood with the other officers; he was silent beneath a vast tarpaulin, sagging with the weight of wet canvas. Occasionally one of the company commanders would step out to walk down the line, offering a few words of encouragement, and then retreat back to cover.

Fog had concealed the ambulances, but Garland knew they were drawing closer. They only had minutes left to complete their tasks, and the moment he dreaded came as General Meigs, commander of the garrison of Washington, emerged out of the coiling mist. He was coming down from General Lee's mansion, followed by several of his staff. The men behind him sat hunched over in their saddles with hat brims pulled low against the easterly breeze, which carried the lashing rain.

Meigs slowed as he weaved his way past the mounds of hundreds of graves that had been dug over the previous month. The raw earth, turned to rivers of mud, was running off the mounds. The older graves were already starting to sink in, and the bodies concealed below returning to the earth. All was mud, and in the damp, fog-shrouded world, a dank unsettling musty smell hung in the air.

Meigs reached the end of the row which had been dug during the night. Colonel Russell, coming out to meet him, followed by the other officers of the 28th, saluted and waited for this morning's criticism.

"The line doesn't look straight to me, Colonel Russell," Meigs announced, voice high-pitched with a nasally twang.

"Sir, I personally supervised the laying out and alignment for seventy-one graves as ordered."

Meigs sniffed. It was the same complaint every morning.

He slowly rode down the line. Garland quickly scanned his men. Those actually down in the graves, still digging, were excused from coming to attention and saluting; besides, it was a rather macabre, even absurd sight to see a man standing chin deep in a grave saluting a general riding by on a horse. However, those above ground did as expected, and Garland nodded inwardly. They were acting like soldiers even when drenched and covered in mud.

Meigs said nothing as their own colonel walked beside him, and that bothered Garland. Russell was a good man: fair, even respectful of the men in his charge, proud of them and eager to show what they could do with a rifle rather than a shovel. Yet it was always the same. Meigs reached the end of the row and turned to look back.

"I tell you, Russell, the line is not straight, and I will not stand for that again. And the graves, can't your damn darkies dig a proper six-foot grave?"

Of course none of the enlisted men spoke. They had borne worse insults nearly every day of their lives.

"Sir, it has been raining steady, nearly a downpour all night. My men know their responsibility here and respect it. At this moment, we need buckets more than we need shovels," he paused. "Sir."

Meigs gazed down coldly.

"I will accept no excuses, Colonel."

"I am offering none, sir."

Even as the two officers confronted each other, shovels continued to rise and fall rhythmically, a few of the men whispering shanties and work songs as they labored.

Meigs gazed coldly at Russell and then to the fog-shrouded road. The ambulances were again visible, now only a few hundred yards away.

"This job will have to be sufficient, though I do not approve of it," Meigs announced. "Order your men to get ready."

Russell offered a salute as Meigs rode over to the drooping tarpaulin to dismount and escape the rain.

"Sergeant Major White!"

Garland, standing a respectful distance to one side during the confrontation, double-timed over with mud splashing, came to attention, and saluted.

"Order the men out of the graves and prepare for burial detail."

"Yes, sir."

Garland turned and shouted the order.

The sight which confronted him in the gray light of early dawn chilled him. Men—his men—his comrades, were crawling up out of the ground, covered head to toe in mud. They looked to his faithful eyes and soul as if the graves had just burst asunder on the Day of Judgment, the saved and the damned answering the call of the last trumpet to arise.

He quickly unbuttoned his uniform and wiped his dirt-encrusted hands on his vest, which was somewhat clean. He then reached into his breast pocket to pull out a fresh pair of white linen gloves. They were wet but unstained.

The men began to form up, a detail of four or five by each grave; men putting on their four-button dark-blue uniform jackets, helping each other to wipe off some of the mud. It was a futile gesture.

Well drilled, one man from each grave detail fetched a couple of fifteen-foot lengths of rope and fell back into formation.

The first of the ambulances turned off the river road and up the muddy track to the lower field of Arlington. The lead mules were

struggling with their burden, slipping in the mud; the driver, snapping a whip, cursed them soundly.

As the first wagon came to a stop down at the end of the line of graves, Garland went down to meet it. The driver sat motionless, head bent over, cupping his hands as he struck a match to light the stub of a cigar, not bothering to help unload.

The details from the first four graves went to the back of the ambulance, dropping the tailgate open.

Four rough-hewn pine coffins and four simple crosses lay within, each cross stenciled with a name, date of birth, the year 1864, and a regimental number.

The coffins were not stamped with names. The graves would have to be nameless, and that deeply troubled Garland. At most of the hospital morgues, someone would pencil the dead man's name on the lid of the rough-hewn coffin. Some, like this load, did not. Four nameless coffins, four crosses that did bear names. In this assembly line of death, once the coffins were carried out of the morgues, the overworked orderlies and drivers usually just tossed the coffins on, and then piled the crosses atop them, to rattle off in the long nighttime drive out beyond the city. It was always done at night; the authorities did not want people to see this daily ritual, especially over this last month with its tide of death.

"Show some respect, boys," Garland sighed. "Try and match the crosses up as best you can. Corporal Turner, you can read. See if there's any markings on the coffins."

The second ambulance pulled up, then the third and the fourth. Garland went to each, motioning over his exhausted diggers to pull out the coffins and carry them the last few feet. There was no ceremony. Mud-splattered men, slipping and sliding, rough-made coffins. He had heard a contractor got \$1.25 for each one; rope handles tacked onto the coffins cost 15 cents extra, so that had been stopped. The men struggled to hold on to their burdens as they placed them beside the open muddy graves.

The team lugging a coffin from the fourth ambulance slipped, dropping its burden, and the tacked-down lid broke open. A couple of the men gasped, recoiling at the face peering out at them. Garland

rushed over to help them lift it back up, ruining another pair of expensive gloves as he did so. He was joined by Lieutenant Grant, who offered soothing words to one of the bearers who began to sob, saying a dead man had looked into his eyes.

He heard a muffled curse from where the officers waited. It was General Meigs commenting on the "superstitions of these men of yours, Russell."

One by one the coffins were placed beside their graves. The first ambulance driver, his charges removed, cracked his whip without a word and started back across the field. Garland worked his way down the row of ambulances, whispering calming words of encouragement, when to his horror he saw that there was an additional ambulance parked beyond the row of seventy-one graves.

No one moved toward it; the driver was half standing.

"Damn it, you benighted bastards, get these bodies out. I'm done for the night and want to go home."

It had happened again. More had died during the night and word had not been sent over.

He could hear Meigs snarling an order to Russell, who came out from under the tarpaulin and up to Garland's side.

"Sergeant Major. See to those bodies please."

Garland hesitated.

"Two to a grave, sir?"

He could see the look of resignation.

"Yes, Sergeant, two to a grave; we'll sort it out later."

Sort it out later. It meant that sometime, a day, perhaps a week from now, maybe months from now, someone, most likely the men of this regiment, would have to dig the graves out, remove the decaying remains, and move them.

Garland motioned the details from the last four graves over and personally went to drop the tailgate. Even he recoiled at what greeted him. Whatever hospital had sent these men over had run out of coffins, yet again. The four dead within were wrapped in the bed-sheets on which they had died. Bare feet were sticking out—the feet of three of the dead. The fourth man had suffered amputation of both feet, and from the stench it was evident that he had died of

gangrene. One of the men of his detail turned away, sobbing and beginning to vomit. The others hesitated to touch the fourth body. Garland reached into the ambulance and pulled the burden out. Even without his legs the man was heavy, and Garland struggled to remain upright. Helping hands reached out to him, and he looked into the eyes of Lieutenant Grant.

Grant struggled to offer a reassuring smile.

"I've done this before," he whispered. "Antietam, Gettysburg. I can handle it. See to your men, Sergeant."

"Please let me help."

Beside Grant stood a tall lanky man, wearing a filth-encrusted officer's eleven-button jacket, hatless in the rain, dark red or perhaps brown hair plastered to his skull. His green eyes were deep set but hollow, looking as if he had not slept in days, and his face was pale, unshaved for at least a week or more. An oversized haversack dangled off his right hip, and his well-made, knee-high boots were scuffed and torn, as were his dark brown nonmilitary trousers.

He reached out to join the two as they carried the body over to one of the open graves and carefully set it down beside a coffin. All saw it, and Garland had to bite his lip to hold back the emotion of the moment. Young Grant was a veteran, and he wondered at that instant how many men he had carried in that same way. He did not know the civilian, who stepped back with bowed head, his shoulders beginning to shake.

"Sergeant Major." He turned; and it was Colonel Russell who stood with features taut. "After Fredericksburg, we stacked men three deep in open trenches. The ground was frozen solid and we had to pickax the holes. Bury them now. Tonight we'll try and give them their own graves. We can't leave them out here like this, and I want the men back in barracks as soon as possible and out of this weather. Enough of you are sick already."

"Battalion, attention!"

It was the chaplain for the cemetery, who had come out from under the tarpaulin and now stood in the middle of the row of open graves, open Bible in hand.

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