

Harper's Shiloh Extracts

Harper's time had come. The fire from his men into their flank should break up the Rebel formation but the Iowans needed to be quick about it. "Hurry, men. Hurry." Harper yelled to the soldiers rushing to find cover on either side of him.

Walden promised to give the Rebels two volleys before retreating, less than thirty seconds to bring his men into the fight. If not, the Sixth Iowa would leave and his riflemen would be left behind. The Rebels has already captured Harper and Cooke once in this war. He would never let it happen again. Harper focused back on the pasture.

"Fire when ready." Harper set the example by sending his own bullet into the mass of Rebel infantry. Men on both sides let loose a ragged volley which felled a few Rebels but did not seem to divert their attention from the Sixth. Harper looked to both sides of his line. They operated under their skirmish rules: half of the riflemen loaded their weapons while their skirmish partners held fire.

"Fire at will, boys!" Harper stood and ran behind the loose line of skirmish teams. "Come on! Pour it into them! Let them know we're here."

Walden's second volley sounded over the disorganized rattle of the rebel muskets while scattered puffs of gun smoke drifted into the tree limbs over Walden's men. Harper looked but could not detect whether Walden's men had stayed.

"Fire, damn ya, fire as fast as ya can." Harper swung his rifle in the air as the trained skirmishers from Companies B and C opened up on the Rebel line. Pride and satisfaction filled him while he watched the skirmishers he had trained score hit after hit whenever they fired into the compact mass of Rebels. All of the riflemen lay in the underbrush or knelt behind trees or bushes and fired without delay. He reloaded his own rifle while he watched his men perform. Even the phlegmatic Gunderson became excited, waving his sword and shouting encouragement to the Company C skirmishers.

The cannon on the hill behind Harper bellowed and a shot ripped through the Rebel ranks tearing men to pieces and throwing those pieces into the air before scouring the earth on the opposite side of the formation. The cannons had fired at the extreme range for canister to be effective but enough Rebs fell that the captain of the right-most company in the Rebel line pulled his line back and away from the artillery assault.

Harper's plan worked. As he had hoped, the Rebel commander, in fear of becoming surrounded, stopped their attack in spite of the small number of Federals facing them. Assailed from three angles, they could break at any moment now.

His own men kept up a steady, continuous fire bringing down rebel after rebel and making their presence known by the gun smoke rising into the web of tree branches overhead. Harper glanced at Walden's position where an ominous silence remained among those trees and bushes. The bodies of fallen rebels disordered the Rebel formation when it attempted to fall back, spreading the disorder.

At last, musket fire from in front of the target signaled that Walden had stayed. Harper breathed a sigh of relief.

Good man, Walden.

Harper saw a face he recognized. "Pour it on, Cooke. They won't stand now." Cooke grunted and pulled the trigger. Along the line of Cooke's barrel, a Rebel dropped his musket and clutched his arm. Harper thrilled at the noise and violence which his men brought onto the Rebels. "There ya, go. Keep it up, men." Harper moved farther along the line while reloading.

The riflemen fired as many as ten un-aimed rounds each minute, compared to the two or three rounds coming from the Rebel muskets. As long as the target remained in its tight formation, even un-aimed fire caused casualties. Harper knelt to see under the thickening cloud of sulfurous gun smoke hovering over his men. He fired into the mass of blue-uniformed men.

Some of the Rebels abandoned the attempt to fold the right of their line back and instead broke ranks to fire at Harper's force. The buzz of scattered Reb bullets zipped through the woods and into the budding leaves at least two feet above the heads of the prone and kneeling skirmishers. A well-timed case shot from the cannon on the hill exploded over the Rebels facing Harper's men, its load of small shot driving a half a dozen into the ground.

The Rebel colonel had enough. He yelled something while circling his sword over his head and pointed to the woods opposite Harper, along Owl Creek. A second round of case shot sped them on their way until the survivors disappeared deep into that wood. The bastards scurried like so many cockroaches caught in the light. They deserved no better for trying to destroy the Union.

The sun had left the clouded western sky by the time the two-vehicle train of Texan medical vehicles started down the road, with Doctor Weston's coach leading the way. Each of the medical orderlies found his specific place in the caravan: two on the driver's bench of each vehicle, while the last two rode with the wounded in the bed of the wagon. Katie, Heather, and the spare horse followed at the tail end of the wagon train.

Doctor Weston had elected to remove the medical team to the Army's large hospital somewhere miles to the south. They began the journey on the road to the river, the same one used by the cavalymen. However, after passing through some woods, the caravan turned south onto the road to Corinth.

Katie must make a decision: should she continue along with the Texans or should she make good on the promise to herself to escape into the darkness. The Texans and the other Southerners had all treated her with respect once she proved her nursing skills. Except for Gustav's friends, the ones she considered her brothers, the Iowa men never let her forget she once worked in a saloon. Where the Federal orderlies laughed and insulted her when she tried to treat sick men, the Texas sergeant had even thanked her and asked her to stay.

The road south curved back beside the field where the field hospital had been. Distant lightning strokes illuminated the skies and the earth miles to the west. After each flash, there followed a short spate of gunfire coming from where her friends lay surrounded. The gun fight ended before the road curved back into the darkening woods along its inevitable course southwards. Heather plodded along behind the wagons, horse and rider raising stares from the men walking beside the road.

If Katie went with the Rebels, could she find a place to belong in the South? The men who worked for the doctor seemed nice, but the Featherstones and Captain Harper had already accepted her into their families. She might find a place in the large Rebel hospital or maybe even riding with the Texas orderlies.

On the other hand, she had become the ward of Captain Harper. He had protected her through everything that happened since they escaped from Paducah. Her Iowa friends might not survive after tomorrow. Should she now desert them when they needed her the most?

Crack!

Harper's first volley erupted from the gully behind Magnusson. Birds feeding in the surrounding pasture took to the air through the rising wraiths of morning mist.

As Magnusson expected, the volley from Johns and Kerns dropped the standing sentry. The fight had begun and Magnusson's blood fired up. He and Cooke fired at the second Rebel who sat next to a small campfire. The target disappeared from view. The third sentry remained out of sight, lying down somewhere near the fire.

To his left, Ford and Halbert ran at full speed over the dew-wet grass but needed several more seconds before they could reach the road. Magnusson and the men with him must force the two surviving Rebels to keep their heads down so they could not have a clear shot at the runners. He looked back at the copse in time to see gun smoke rise from the leaf-litter and deadfall—probably a carbine from its sound. Ford and Halbert kept running but switched to a zig-zag approach to confuse the shooter.

Harper's second volley sounded from behind the flankers.

"Up! Ungh!" Magnusson gasped at the stitch in his side when he climbed out of the gully but he kept moving. He searched for the Confederates hidden in the copse while he waited for the others to join him. No luck. The Rebs must be lying very low.

"Load." Magnusson obeyed his own order while watching that the others did also.

"At the double. We need to get those two." He gulped down the pain gripping his ribs. The pain was the price he paid for being here and, today, he would be nowhere else. The time had come for retribution on the grey-backed bastards.

A second shot came from the copse. Magnusson saw gun smoke rise but could not tell which of his men it targeted. Ford and Halbert had almost reached the bridge.

"Halt. Skirmish order." Magnusson and the three men with him paired off fifty yards from the trees.

Magnusson knelt and fired blindly at the ground below the newest puff of gun smoke. It would not hit anything but it might disrupt the Rebel's next shot. Nate Johns knelt twenty feet to Magnusson's right and fired.

As Harper had trained them, the men worked in three teams, with one man keeping a lookout for danger while the other loaded his weapon. The system kept both men in the team safe. Once both men held loaded weapons, they would advance at the walk until either selected a target. Hopefully, the approaching threat would flush the remaining Rebs from cover.

Crack.

Magnusson could not see Ford and Halbert near the bridge but the report from a Sharps rifle and a puff of smoke revealed their location along the road grade. A Rebel bullet impacted the road gravel in front of the pair, sending up a spout of stone and dust.

"Forward! At the double!" Based on the rate of fire, Magnusson surmised that the Rebel used a muzzle-loader. It would allow perhaps fifteen seconds before he would could fire again. However, at this range, the shotgun the bastard held could be lethal.

A Rebel poked his head above a fallen tree trunk and fired his shotgun into the general area of Johns and Kerns before he fled through the opposite edge of the copse. Cooke, Johns, and Kerns crashed into the thicket. Magnusson tried to keep up but the aches in his ribs would not allow him to take full breaths. Two rifle shots sounded to Magnusson's left. Ahead Cooke pointed his rifle at something on the ground. While looking for Johns and Kerns, Magnusson nearly tripped over the body of the first of the Rebel pickets. Pain gripped his entire chest when he reached out to balance himself.

"On your feet, Reb." Cooke pulled the hammer on his rifle to the full-cocked position. "Drop the carbine."

By the time Magnusson reached Cooke, Johns and Kerns had arrived. He addressed Johns. "The other son-of-a-bitch?"

"Got him," Johns replied. "Dead."

“Good.” Magnusson walked over to the body of the first sentry. Blood oozed from two holes in the man’s leaf-brown jacket. Magnusson addressed Johns. “Signal Ira and Billy that it’s over. Bring them back here.”

“Yes, Corporal.”

Still gasping with pain, Magnusson looked back at the corpse and allowed the simmering anger to flood through his body. The vision of Ben Bailey’s back-broken body and the final desperate expression on Joe Davis’ face flashed into his mind. He stomped a heel onto the corpse’s forehead as hard as he could.