

Along the Battlement

by Paul de Denus

We gather in our makeshift camp, a scrub of branch, log and bush hidden near the eastern end of the bay. We - - myself, William Cobb and Robert Forrester - - study X's and O's linked by dotted lines that cover a crudely drawn map. Two brothers, Henry and James Connor lay prone nearby, on cool grass next to a fallen tree and attend to muddied rifles, worn and bent. The days have been long and lazy, this summer the hottest that we can remember in our short time here. We have spent many hours scouting and planning and it has paid off with the taking of Red Rock and the capture of the northern Ridge. And now the plan for the attack on the fort has taken shape. Cobb has organized daily explorations of the terrain, sketching these quick maps and discussing plausible scenarios for our attack. He has an eye for this, a talent for taking on and conquering the vast world around him. He has become our group's quiet leader and my best friend. The fort will be a challenge though. It sits atop a hill, with high limestone walls on all sides protected by a surrounding moat perhaps thirty feet deep. The bay cups the south and west corners, the north and east sides open and steep, the ground barren, no trees or rock for camouflage or cover. Cobb encourages us. "A piece of cake," he says. "A piece of cake."

Forrester believes there may be a way into the fort, a tunnel on the west side. We head out in search and after sloughing through the thicket along the west water's edge find a drainage tunnel leaking out between an avalanche of cascading rock. Its opening is only a yard or so across at best and it smells of heavy raw sewage.

"We 'aint goin' in there," James says. "It's too small anyway."

"Alright," Cobb says with a cough. "Here's the plan. We'll make a surprise attack from the north then. They won't expect that."

We creep the hill, flat on our bellies through yellowed grass and stone, black dirt grimed on our bright faces like powdered war paint. We are sitting ducks as we approach, out in the open like this but Cobb believes no one will be watching this side; it is so exposed. We believe him. Henry Connor is to my left with his younger brother at his hip. They now move in a low, slow crouch, ready to spring upon command. Up ahead is Forrester, the youngest of our group, acting as lead scout. To my right is Cobb. I stare at his shadowed face as he surveys the hilltop. He will not live to see the coming fall.

Our rifles lead the way, pointed at the ready, aimed at the quiet ramparts staring down at us. The day is getting late and there is a sense to hurry. "GO!" Cobb grunts and we pick ourselves up and charge the hill.

POW! POW! POWPOW!

There is the fierce sound of voices yelling and hooting as we race up toward the moat's edge, firing at will, firing over the long black cannons that nose out along the battlement, silently commanding the northern horizon.

POW! POW! POWPOW!

I turn and see that Cobb has stopped running. He is sitting with his back to me, facing the darkening skyline.

"Wait!" I call to the others and rush back down.

"William. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he says quietly. "Just a little winded. I feel kind of weak."

Henry and James come sliding along side us.

"What? What's going on?"

"Let's head back to camp," I say, taking William by the arm, waving Forrester back from the moat's edge. He ambles down, joining our slow retreat.

There are no more campaigns for us. The fort remains occupied. The cannons watch silent out over the bay as the ghosts of our youth perform revolving plays of forceless attacks. We return to the world, to thoughts of the not-so-distant new school year and to a different battle looming, a confounding fight led by worrying adults who will struggle to understand William's incurable illness. I will wonder what part a ten-year-old boy is supposed to play and I will struggle hard to carry on the following summer's campaign without him.

