Boy Soldier

An excerpt from Soldier’s Heart by Gary Paulsen

When the War Between the States erupted, politicians, newspapers, and people all said it would last only a couple of months, three at the most. Charley Goddard thought he had to hurry to enlist before the fighting ended. A war might come along once in a man’s life, Charley thought. He didn’t want to miss his only chance to be a part of the glory and honor.

“A man’s life” – that was the problem. At 16, Charley was still a boy. Sure, he worked in fields all day like a man, had a back and hands as strong as a man’s. His voice had started to deepen like a man’s. But the Union Army, the youngest a “man” could be to enlist was 18.

That didn’t stop Charley, though. He longed to see places outside of Winona, Minnesota, where he was born and had grown up. So he lied in order to join the state’s regiment. And the officers didn’t question him. He was a Union soldier now, ready to go off and fight the rebels.

At first, being a soldier meant having a pretty boring time of it. He performed drills and ate bad food and listened to sergeants and corporals yell at him. This isn’t war, he thought, this is playacting. Soon enough, though, he stepped onto a train and traveled across Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and down into Maryland to where the real war was being fought.

Before he knew it, death was everywhere. The more he saw, the more he didn’t want to be fighting in a real war. But it was too late. Charley Goddard had said he was a man, and now he really had to be one.

Charley studied the trees that lay 200 yards off. Nelson was a new man – had come in with a batch of replacements from Minnesota that had caught up to them in the camp around Washington. Charley looked at him, saw the innocence, and felt his own age. Not in years. He was only 16. But in meadows. He was old in the art of crossing meadows. He wanted to tell Nelson about it, about what would be waiting when they went up to that line of trees to “kick the Rebs out.” He opened his mouth, started to say something, then stopped. There was too much, a world too much to say. You couldn’t say it. You had to live it. You had to see it.

“You don’t know nothing,” he told Nelson. “You don’t know as much as a slick-eared calf.”

Nelson stopped working on his rifle. “Well, ain’t you one to take on airs? I guess I know enough—I know all I’ll need.”

Charley began to say more but instead just shook his head and walked away, looking for some cartridges to fill his box.

It started the same way again, this third time. The officers dismounted and moved to the front with their sabers, the sergeants just to their rear screaming at the men.
“All right! Form on me! Line-of-battle here!”

Charley stepped forward with the rest. He did not think of fear, did not think of what would happen, what he knew would happen. He stepped forward in line, checked the cap on his rifle and fixed his bayonet, and when they ordered, he started walking across the field with the rest of the men.

“Lord…”

There was no sound except for the clink of metal against metal on their shoulder straps, and Charley heard Nelson’s voice whispering next to him.

“Lord, there they are, right there. See them?”

Charley said nothing, but Nelson was right. He too could see the Rebel soldiers. This time they were not behind earthworks but were forming in ranks in front of the trees, just as the Union soldiers had done.

“They’re going to come at us,” Nelson said. “They’re forming to attack us.”

And even as he said it the Rebel soldiers began to scream and run forward at them. There was still no firing—the distance was too great—but the scream could easily be heard. It was the first time Charley was to hear the Rebel yell, and for a moment it frightened him, but everything had to be compared, and he thought of the fright of the first day, first battle, and the yell was nothing.

This was not a line of earthworks, with shells coming from cannons. This was not a hidden line of fire and death.

These were men, only men, no matter the yelling, and as the Rebels came running toward them the Union officers stopped the marching soldiers.

“Present arms!”

Charley raised his rifle.

“Ready—aim low, aim at their legs—fire!”

The men fired as one, and the front rank of advancing Rebels went down.

“Reload and fire at will!”

Charley bit a cartridge without taking his eyes off the Rebels. They were still coming, but slower, the charge broken by the first volley, and he reloaded and fired four times, each time aiming low, and was reloading the fifth time when an officer to his front raised his saber.
“At them, men!” he screamed. “Give them steel!”

The officer started running at the confused Confederate line, and the Union soldiers followed, bayonets extended to the front.

*Where’s your yell now?* Charley thought, and then realized that he was screaming it. “Where’s your damn yell now?”

The Confederates started to hold, tried to stand. They fired once at the charging Union soldiers, and out of the corner of his eye Charley saw men fall. But five smashing volleys of accurate fire had demoralized the Regels, cut their numbers at least in half, and when they saw the blue line coming at them through the powder smoke, saw the glint of the bayonets, it was more than they could stand, and they turned and ran.

“Look—they’re showing tail,” a man next to Charley yelled as they ran, and Charley glanced at him, surprised. Nelson had been there. Cocky Nelson. He was nowhere to be seen, and Charley hadn’t seen him get hit, hadn’t seen him fall. Charley ran on.

Some men slowed, satisfied that they’d won the fight, but Charley couldn’t stop running and soon found himself in front of the line. He would have been shocked to see himself. His lips were drawn back showing his teeth, and his face was contorted by a savage rage.

He wanted to kill them. He wanted to catch them and run his bayonet through them and kill them. All of them. Stick and jab and shoot them and murder them and kill them all, each and every Rebel’s son of them. Not one would be able to get up. Not one. Kill them all.

Before they could kill him.

He was out of himself, beside himself, an animal, and it is difficult to say how far he would have gone; certainly he would have caught up with them, and since he was nearly alone and would have been alone when he did so, he would have been killed. But one of the sergeants stuck the butt of his rifle between Charley’s ankles and brought him down.

“Better hold up there, gamecock—you can’t take the whole Rebel army. Besides, they don’t want any more of you. Let them go.”

Charley sat on the ground, still snarling, watching the retreating Rebels. “We have to kill them….”

“You’ll get another chance,” the sergeant said, smiling. “Now re-form and let’s get a line fixed again.” He turned away and yelled at the other men. “On me—line-of-battle! Form line-of-battle!”

Charley got up and reloaded his rifle. The Rebels had gotten back into the trees and were firing, sniping at the Union lines, but the bullets all went high.
“Withdraw!” the sergeant yelled. “In formation, in good order, withdraw!”

They moved back across the field and had gone perhaps 40 paces when Charley saw Nelson.

He was sitting on the ground, one hand holding his stomach. Charley broke rank and knelt beside him.

“Where are you hit?” He already knew the answer. Blood and other matter slid through Nelson’s fingers onto the ground.

“Belly,” Nelson said. “I got me a belly wound. Wouldn’t you know it? First fight and I get me a belly wound.” He gasped the words. The pain was already making it hard for him to breathe, and Charley knew the real pain hadn’t truly started yet.

“You’ll be fine,” Charley said. “The ambulance will come get you and you’ll be back in Minnesota in no time—“

“Don’t,” Nelson said through his teeth. “Don’t lie. They don’t pick up men with belly wounds and you know it. They’ll give me some water and leave me to die.”

Charley didn’t say anything but knew it was true. Stomach wounds were fatal. The surgeons could do nothing. The ambulance drivers would go through the wounded—when and if they got to the field—and jerk shirts up checking for stomach wounds. Those soldiers would be left. The surgeons were too busy with amputations and treatable injuries to spend time on those with stomach wounds.

It was an agonizingly slow death—it might take two days—and the pain left men screaming until they were too hoarse to make another sound.

“I don’t want to die like this,” Nelson said. “Just lying here waiting for it…”

Charley didn’t say anything because there was nothing to say.

“Load my rifle, will you, Charley? I fired it just as I was hit. Load it for me just in case the Rebs come back, will you?”

Charley hesitated, then nodded and picked up Nelson’s rifle, tore a cartridge off with his teeth, poured the powder down the bore and settled the bullet on the powder.

“Don’t forget the cap, Charley. Seat the cap good.”

Charley pinched a cap and set it on the nipple, pushing it down tightly with his thumb. He put the hammer on half cock.
“Just put the rifle next to me, with the butt down by my foot. Yes, like that. Now cock the hammer, will you? Thank you. That’s right kind of you, Charley. Just one more thing. I can’t reach down to my foot, and there’s a powerful itch on my right foot. Would you take my show off before you go so I can scratch it?”

Charley unlaced the shoe and pulled it off. The foot was white, so white it looked like marble, as if it wasn’t alive. Well, he thought, soon enough.

“I got me a letter back in my haversack where we put them down before we formed up,” Nelson said. “Would you see that it gets mailed back to my folks in Deerwood? And tell them, if you see them, that I died with my face to the enemy, will you?”

Charley nodded and was surprised to find that he was crying. He did not think he could cry any longer, but the tears were sliding down his cheeks. “Do you have water?”

Nelson nodded.

“Just take small sips,” Charley said. “They say to just take small sips.”

“Thank you for this—after I snotted back at you that way.”

“That was nothing.”

“Thank you anyway.”

“It’s nothing.” Charley took a breath. The sergeant was coming back across the meadow toward him. One of the rules, he knew, was that you didn’t stop for the wounded. When a man went down he was alone, even if he was your brother. “You want me to stay with you?”

Nelson shook his head. “They might be ready for another attack.”

Charley stood and waved the sergeant back. “Well, then…”

“Yes—you’d better go.”

Charley nodded, but his feet didn’t want to move. He had to force them, think about them moving, and with that he walked slowly. It was strange, he thought, the crying. I don’t even rightly know him—still don’t know his first name—and here I am crying. With all the men I’ve seen drop and I don’t even know him and—

The sound of the shot stopped him. He stood for a moment, the tears working down his face, stood for a long moment and then started walking again. He did not look back.

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