

Snake Hill Chronicles: The Drummer's Consequence

a fictional short story by Catherine Raby

Snake Hill near Fort Erie, August 1814

The smell of death filled my nostrils and my lungs. I felt the strong urge to cover my nose, but my arms were too numb. I tried to move, but a heavy weight pinned me down. I could hardly breathe. Despite the summer heat I shivered and my teeth chattered.

The inky black sky was dotted with brilliant yellow and white stars — I wondered, would this be the last time I saw them? A sob escaped my mouth. I sucked in my breath, a failed attempt to keep the despair that threatened to overtake me at bay. I wanted to cry out for my mother, for she always comforted me when I was hurt or afraid — but she has been gone for two years. My father, killed by a musket ball at Lundy's Lane, cannot help either. Perhaps this is my time, and I will soon be joining them.

Screams of pain echoed around me. At least I was not alone in my misery. Dazed and weak, I struggled to remember exactly what had happened. How I came to be lying here on the cold hard ground.

The rat-a-tat of my drum suddenly emerged in my head followed by the roar of guns and the boom of cannons . . . I had been drumming out new orders, when a cannon ball came flying over the ramparts, bounced off the ground, and hit the man behind me. A few moments later an explosive shell struck the ground in front of me. The flash blinded me and struck me dumb. Almost at the same moment something hard and heavy knocked me to the ground. Moments later, or perhaps hours — I have no way of knowing — I awoke to find myself here, helpless, with naught else to do, but wait to die.

The weight on my chest suddenly lifted from my body, jolting me from my thoughts.

"Mr. Baxter, as usual you've gotten yourself into a bit of a quandary."

I recognized Captain Brooks as he lifted me off the ground. It was dawn, I now realized, as the sight of debris and bodies scattered across the ground, flashed by, as he carried me to the medical tent. The acrid smell of gunpowder still hung heavy in the air, as the British continued to bombard us with their cannons and guns.

"I have another one," I heard the Captain yell as we entered the tent. He laid me down on the surgeon's table.

Dr. Miller, the medical surgeon came into view. Knife in hand, his apron covered in blood and gore. The sight and smell of it made me want to vomit.

I heard the tear of fabric and watched in stunned detachment as Dr. Miller shook his head at Captain Brooks.

"It has to come off," he said.

Captain Brooks furrowed his brows. "The lad is but fourteen. Is there naught else that can be done?"

"The arm is damaged beyond repair. It will do naught, but fester. The wound must be made clean by cutting out the damaged flesh and bone. There is no time, and many others wait to be operated on."

"No!" I cried, and sat bolt upright, the meaning of his words startling me like a bucket of cold water to the face.

Strong arms pushed me down, and held me in a vice like grip. I struggled against the force, but it was no use.

"Mr. Phelps, strap him down," Dr. Miller ordered his surgeon mate. He turned to Captain Brooks. "If you are going to just stand there with your mouth agape, I suggest you either leave, or step in and lend a hand!"

"No, don't leave!" I yelled.

The Captain stopped and turned. "What do you want me to do?"
"Hold him down at the shoulders, Mr. Phelps will hold down the boy's legs. Try to calm him."

It was then I realized I was shaking so hard the table rattled.
"Henry, it will be all right. You must stay very still," the Captain said.
How could it be all right when I was about to have my arm cut off! I narrowed my eyes.
"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not. You are strong and brave. You will prevail."
He then grasped my shoulders and held me firm against the table. I felt something cold wrap around my arm. Startled, I jerked my head to the side.

"It is a tourniquet, it will help control the bleeding," Doctor Miller explained. "Drink this it will help dull the pain." My mouth was then pried open and a substance forced down my throat. I choked on the whisky as it burned its way down. A musket ball was then shoved in my mouth. I was ordered to clamp it between my teeth.

Pain that defies words slashed through my arm the instant the surgeon's knife made the first cut through the skin and tissue. I clamped hard on the musket ball surprised my teeth did not crack. The second cut sliced through the muscle right to the bone.

I screamed out, but hardly any sound came from my clenched mouth. I saw a flash of the surgeon's saw. The next instant the pain so excruciating, I thought I would die. My heart pounded in my ears as I heard the distinct snap of bone. Then all went black.

I awoke to find myself recovering in the field hospital. So far, unlike so many others, I have yet to succumb to infection. Captain Brooks saved my arm from the medical waste pit. I am grateful. It was buried with the poor fellow who was struck by the same blast as I was. The Captain says I am to be honourably discharged from service. I know it has nothing to do with heroics — I can no longer drum or hold a musket. I am of no further use to the military. My opportunities are now very few.

Fate however, has given me a second chance. I must carry on. My father would have expected it. I will not dishonour his memory. Tomorrow I am to be transported across the Niagara River to the Sandytown military hospital. When I am back on my home soil I will give my future some thought. For now I must rest, regain my strength, for I have a long journey ahead and a future yet to be discovered.

Snake Hill, August 1814

My Dearest Eliza,

I know it has been months since I last wrote. Paper is so difficult to find, and as an officer I have so little time to write. I miss you and Clarissa tremendously and hope you are both well.

The British bombardment continues. No one is safe from the constant rain of solid shot and explosive shells. Just the other morn I awoke, and barely had my legs swung over the cot, when cannon shot ripped through my tent and tore apart my pillow. If I had but a moment earlier been still abed I would have met my maker in a very gruesome way. I thank God each day for my health and safekeeping.

We are low on supplies. Sickness runs rampant through out the camp. Cholera and dysentery seem as of late to be more our enemy than the British. Most of my men lack shoes, their uniforms worn out and naught but rags upon their backs. However, the men bravely persevere.

It is an honour to lead so many men with such pride and grit. Just this morning I held a young drummer boy while Dr. Miller amputated his arm. With naught else but whisky to dull his senses, Henry endured what must have been excruciating pain, with dignity and valour. Tomorrow he is to be transported by litter over the Niagara River to Sandytown New York, where he will recover and be given an honourable discharge from the army.

I must confess that Henry's strength of character and perseverance has impressed me. I have decided that when he has recovered enough to travel, I will entrust him to deliver this letter. He is a hard worker, and a fine young man. I am sure he can be of a help to you with the chores my absence has burdened you with.

Though I must warn you he is quite proud, and I am sure will not want to rely on what he would consider our charity. I know with your considerable charm, will be able to convince him otherwise. I must now leave off.

As a husband and father I give both you and Clarissa my full love and esteem.

Jonathan Brooks
Captain, 23rd Infantry

Note from the Author: Inspiration to write the "Snake Hill Chronicles" came from reading *Death at Snake Hill* by Paul Litt, Ronald F. Williamson & Joseph Whitethorne (Dundurn Press, 1993). The book documents the 1987 excavation of a United States military burial graveyard from the War of 1812 at Fort Erie. The discovery of an additional forearm and hand, found buried in a site along with another complete skeleton, intrigued me. The arm is believed to have belonged to a very young teenager. I wondered; where did that arm come from? Look for the next edition to the "Snake Hill Chronicles" soon to be posted on our website at [www. carf.info](http://www.carf.info)