

Snake Hill Chronicles Part III

In Enemy Hands

A fictional short story by Catherine Raby

Snake Hill near Fort Erie, August 1814.

The incessant thrum pounds in my head, like a hundred drums beating at once. I crack open an eye only to slam it shut again, the bright light so intense my head feels like it is about to split in two.

Unfamiliar voices surround me. Who are they? I wonder. A myriad of haphazard recollections hazily float through my mind. I try to remember. There is naught but a thick fog.

Something jabs into my shoulder. I jolt and cry out.

“It’s too deep. I cannot reach it with my finger, Mr. Phelps, hand me the ball extractor.”

My eyes now wide open. I stare up into the face of my tormentor. An unassuming man who does not appear to be the type to easily inflict pain on others. However, my mind is quickly changed as he savagely jabs my flesh with what feels like a red-hot poker. I nearly jump out of my skin the pain is so severe.

“Hold him down! I can’t get the damn ball out if he’s thrashing about.”

Firm hands hold me steady as the torture continues, my mind now clear from its mental fog, I try not to think of the pain but instead, focus on the night’s events and how I ended up here—in enemy hands. The forlorn hope, we were ordered to attack and take Snake Hill. We did not succeed. Trapped between the battery and the abatis we were naught but hapless sheep penned up awaiting slaughter. Ordered to remove our flints and take the hill by bayonet we had little chance of success. Grapeshot rained down on my head. I had no choice but to slash, thrust and hack my way through the American pickets. All of a sudden I was knocked off my feet. Then, everything went black. Jolted from my thoughts I hear a jubilant yell.

“Got it!” the surgeon cries as he triumphantly brandishes his blood soaked arm in the air. Grasped in his hand is the ball extractor. Clamped between its two pincers is the blood soaked musket ball that had been lodged in my flesh.

“Mr. Phelps hold him steady. There is still a fragment of fabric from his uniform that needs to be removed.”

“Why bother?” I ask.

His brows furrowed

“I must extract it or it will fester.”

“I am naught but the enemy, why save my life?”

“War sometimes brings out the worst in men, humanity often lost—it is a sad day indeed when one loses their humanity. It is the one thing I have vowed never to lose. I am a surgeon first, a soldier second. My duty is to save lives regardless of what uniform they wear. When I look at you I do not see an enemy. I see a patient in need of my assistance.”

“Now, I must finish with your wounds. I have many more patients in need of my attention”

I nod my head and allow the surgeon to probe one last time into my wound. Everything is all of a sudden so clear to me. Other than the colour of our uniforms the enemy is no different than I am. I wonder—how had it happened? Somewhere along the line I had lost my own humanity. With only three months left of my term of enlistment I vow never again to take another life in the heat of battle. God has granted me a second chance at life and I will honour this gift by living the rest of my life in peace.

Note from the Author: The **Treaty of Ghent** was signed by representatives of the United States and Great Britain to officially end the War of 1812 on December 24, 1814. Prisoners on both sides were then repatriated.

As with Part I and II of the Snake Hill Chronicles the inspiration to write these stories 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. If you would like to read the Snake Hill Chronicles I and II you can visit our website at carf@carf.info.

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