

Excerpt from *Soldier's Heart*

by Gary Paulsen

Make it stop now, Charley thought, or thought he was thinking until he realized he was screaming it: "Make it all stop now!"

Death was everywhere, nowhere. Bullets flew past him with evil little snaps and snickers as they cut the air. Next to him Massey's head suddenly left his body and disappeared, taken by a cannon round that then went through an officer's horse, end to end, before plowing into the ground.

This can't be, he thought. I can't be here. A terrible mistake. I'm not supposed to be here.

He had forgotten to fire. The officers had marched them out into a field in perfect order and told them where to aim and fire and he had raised his rifle and then the whole world had come at him. The Rebel soldiers were up a shallow grade a hundred yards away, behind some fallen trees, and they had opened on Charley and the others before anyone else could fire.

It was like a blade cutting grain. He heard the bullets hitting the men—little thunk-slaps—and saw the men falling. Some of them screamed as they fell. Most were silent. Many were dead before they hit the ground. Many were torn apart, hit ten or twelve or more times before they had time to drop.

The men left standing with Charley fired, then the survivors of that round reloaded and fired again, and Charlie aimed in the general direction of the Rebels and pulled his trigger, firing blind.

The black powder smoke clouded from the rifles and the rebel guns on the hill and it was impossible to see or understand anything.

I don't know anything, Charley thought—the words jerked through his mind before he thought them.