

Also by

TONY HORWITZ

Baghdad Without a Map

One for the Road

CONFEDERATES
IN THE
ATTIC

*Dispatches from the
Unfinished Civil War*

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CONFEDERATES IN THE ATTIC

*There never will be anything more interesting
in America than that Civil War never.*

—GERTRUDE STEIN

In 1965, a century after Appomattox, the Civil War began for me at a musty apartment in New Haven, Connecticut. My great-grandfather held a magnifying glass to his spectacles and studied an enormous book spread open on the rug. Peering over his shoulder, I saw pen-and-ink soldiers hurtling up at me with bayonets. I was six, Poppa Isaac 101. Egg-bald, barely five feet tall, Poppa Isaac lived so frugally that he sliced cigarettes in half before smoking them. An elderly relative later told me that Poppa Isaac bought the book of Civil War sketches soon after emigrating to America in 1882. He often shared it with his children and grandchildren before I came along.

Years later, I realized what was odd about this one vivid memory of my great-grandfather. Isaac Moses Perski fled Czarist Russia as a teenaged draft dodger—in Yiddish, a *shirker*—and arrived at Castle Garden without money or English or family. He worked at a Lower East Side sweatshop and lived literally on peanuts, which were cheap, filling and nutritious. Why, I wondered, had this thrifty refugee chosen

as one of his first purchases in America a book written in a language he could barely understand, about a war in a land he barely knew, a book that he kept poring over until his death at 102?

By the time Poppa Isaac died, my father had begun reading aloud to me each night from a ten-volume collection called *The Photographic History of the Civil War*. Published in 1911, the volumes' ripe prose sounded as foreign to me as the captions of my great-grandfather's book must have seemed to him. So, like Poppa Isaac, I lost myself in the pictures: sepia men leading sepia horses across cornfields and creeks; jaunty volunteers, their faces framed by squished caps and fire-hazard beards; barefoot Confederates sprawled in trench mud, eyes open, limbs twisted like licorice. For me, the fantastical creatures of Maurice Sendak held little magic compared to the man-boys of Mathew Brady who stared back across the century separating their lives from mine.

Before long, I began to read aloud with my father, chanting the strange and wondrous rivers—Shenandoah, Rappahannock, Chickahominy—and wrapping my tongue around the risible names of rebel generals: Braxton Bragg, Jubal Early, John Sappington Marmaduke, William "Extra Billy" Smith, Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard. I learned about palindromes from the Southern sea captain Raphael Semmes. And I began to match Brady's still-deaths with the curt stutter of farm roads and rocks that formed the photographer's backdrop: Mule Shoe, Slaughter Pen, Bloody Lane, Devil's Den.

In third grade, I penciled a highly derivative Civil War history of my own—"The war was started when after all the states had seceded," it began—and embarked on an ambitious art project, painting the walls of our attic with a lurid narrative of the conflict. Preferring underdogs, I posted a life-sized Johnny Reb by the bathroom door. A pharaonic frieze of rebel soldiers at Antietam stretched from the stairs to the attic window. Albert Sidney Johnston's death at Shiloh splashed across an entire wall. General Pickett and his men charged bravely into the eaves.

I'd reached the summer of 1863 and run out of wall. But standing in the middle of the attic, I could whirl and whirl and make myself dizzy with my own cyclorama. The attic became my bedroom and the murals inhabited my boyhood dreaming. And each morning I

woke to a comforting sound: my father bounding up the attic steps, blowing a mock bugle call through his fingers and shouting, "General, the troops await your command!"

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER, the murals were still there and so was my boyhood obsession. I'd just returned to America after nine years abroad and moved to an old house in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. My Australian wife chose the spot; the fields and cows and crooked fences fit Geraldine's image of outback America. For me, the place stirred something else. I stared at a brick church still bullet-scarred from a Civil War skirmish. In the lumpy village graveyard, I found Confederates and Yankees buried side by side, some of them kin to each other. Within an hour of our new home lay several of the battlegrounds I'd painted as a child, and to which I now dragged Geraldine on weekend drives.

At a picnic soon after our arrival, I overheard a neighbor ask Geraldine how she liked Virginia. "Fine," she sighed. "Except that my husband's become a Civil War bore."

I'd always been one, of course, but my obsession had lain dormant for several decades. With adolescence had come other passions, and I'd stuffed my toy musket, plastic rebel soldiers and Lincoln Logs into a closet reserved for boyish things. A Day-Glo poster of Jimi Hendrix supplanted Johnny Reb. Pickett's Charge and Antietam Creek vanished behind dart boards, Star Trek posters and steep drifts of teenage clutter.

But a curious thing had happened while I'd lived abroad. Millions of Americans caught my childhood bug. Ken Burns's TV documentary on the Civil War riveted the nation for weeks. *Glory* and *Gettysburg* played to packed movie houses. The number of books on the Civil War passed 60,000; a bibliography of works on Gettysburg alone ran to 277 pages.

On the face of it, this fad seemed out of character for America. Like most returning expatriates, I found my native country new and strange, and few things felt stranger than America's amnesia about its past. During the previous decade, I'd worked as a foreign correspondent in lands where memories were elephantine: Bosnia, Iraq,

Northern Ireland, Aboriginal Australia. Serbs spoke bitterly of their defeat by Muslim armies at Kosovo as though the battle had occurred yesterday, not in 1389. Protestants in Belfast referred fondly to "King Billy" as if he were a family friend rather than the English monarch who led Orangemen to victory in 1690.

Returning to America, I found the background I lacked wasn't historical, it was pop-cultural. People kept referring to TV shows I'd missed while abroad, or to athletes and music stars I'd never seen perform. In the newspaper, I read a government survey showing that 93 percent of American students couldn't identify "an important event" in Philadelphia in 1776. Most parents also flunked; 73 percent of adults didn't know what event "D-Day" referred to.

Yet Americans remained obsessed with the Civil War. Nor was this passion confined to books and movies. Fights kept erupting over displays of the rebel flag, over the relevancy of states' rights, over a statue of Arthur Ashe slated to go up beside Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson in Richmond. Soon after my return, the Walt Disney Company unveiled plans for a Civil War theme park beside the Manassas battlefield. This provoked howls of protest that Disney would vulgarize history and sully the nation's "hallowed ground." It seemed as though the black-and-white photographs I'd studied as a child had blurred together, forming a Rorschach blot in which Americans now saw all sorts of unresolved strife: over race, sovereignty, the sanctity of historic landscapes, and who should interpret the past.

THEN, EARLY ONE MORNING, the Civil War crashed into my bedroom. A loud popping noise cracked just outside our window. "Is that what I think it is?" Geraldine asked, bolting awake. We'd sometimes heard gunfire while working in the Middle East, but it was the last sound we expected here, in a hamlet of 250 where bleating sheep had been our reveille for the past six months.

I went to the window and saw men in gray uniforms firing muskets on the road in front of our house. Then a woman popped up from behind a stone wall and yelled "Cut!" The firing stopped and the Confederates collapsed in our yard. I brewed a pot of coffee,

gathered some mugs and went outside. It turned out that our village had been chosen as the set for a TV documentary on Fredericksburg, an 1862 battle fought partly along eighteenth-century streets that resembled ours.

But the men weren't actors, at least not professionals, and they performed in the film shoot for little or no pay. "We do this sort of thing most weekends anyway," said a lean rebel with gunpowder smudges on his face and the felicitous name of Troy Cool.

In the local paper, I'd often read about Civil War reenactors who staged mock battles with smoke bombs and reproduction muskets. It was a popular hobby in our part of Virginia. But when I asked about this, Troy Cool frowned. "We're hardcores," he said.

Between gulps of coffee—which the men insisted on drinking from their own tin cups rather than our ceramic mugs—Cool and his comrades explained the distinction. Hardcores didn't just dress up and shoot blanks. They sought absolute fidelity to the 1860s: its homespun clothing, antique speech patterns, sparse diet and simple utensils. Adhered to properly, this fundamentalism produced a time-travel high, or what hardcores called a "period rush."

"Look at these buttons," one soldier said, fingering his gray wool jacket. "I soaked them overnight in a saucer filled with urine." Uric acid oxidized the brass, giving it the patina of buttons from the 1860s. "My wife woke up this morning, sniffed the air and said, 'Tim, you've been peeing on your buttons again.'"

In the field, hardcores ate only foods that Civil War soldiers consumed, such as hardtack and salt pork. And they limited their speech to mid-nineteenth-century dialect and topics. "You don't talk about Monday Night football," Tim explained. "You curse Abe Lincoln or say things like, 'I wonder how Becky's getting on back at the farm.'"

One hardcore took this Method acting to a bizarre extreme. His name was Robert Lee Hodge and the soldiers pointed him out as he ambled toward us. Hodge looked as though he'd stepped from a Civil War tintype: tall, rail-thin, with a long pointed beard and a button uniform so frayed and filthy that it clung to his lank frame like rags to a scarecrow.

As he drew near, Troy Cool called out, "Rob, do the bloat!" Hodge clutched his stomach and crumpled to the ground. His belly swelled

grotesquely, his hands curled, his cheeks puffed out, his mouth contorted in a rictus of pain and astonishment. It was a flawless counterfeit of the bloated corpses photographed at Antietam and Gettysburg that I'd so often stared at as a child.

Hodge leapt to his feet and smiled. "It's an ice-breaker at parties," he said.

For Robert Lee Hodge, it was also a way of life. As the Marlon Brando of battlefield bloating, he was often hired for Civil War movies. He also posed—dead and alive—for painters and photographers who reproduced Civil War subjects and techniques. "I go to the National Archives a lot to look at their Civil War photographs," he said. "You can see much more detail in the original pictures than you can in books."

A crowd of blue-clad soldiers formed down the road. It was time for the battle to resume. Hodge reached in his haversack and handed me a business card. "You should come out with us sometime," he said, his brown eyes boring into mine with evangelical fervor, "and see what a period rush feels like." Then he loped off to join the other rebels crouched behind a stone wall.

I watched the men fight for a while, then went back inside and built a fire. I pulled down Poppa Isaac's book from the shelf. The tome was so creased with age that the title had rubbed off its spine and the pages discharged a puff of yellowed paper-dust each time I opened the massive cover. Searching for pictures of Fredericksburg, I quickly became lost in the Civil War, as I'd been so often since our return to America.

Geraldine came in with a cup of coffee. She'd chatted with a few of the men, too. "It's strange," she said, "but they seemed like ordinary guys." One worked as a Bell Atlantic salesman, another as a forklift operator. Even Robert Lee Hodge had seemed, well, normal. During the week, he waited on tables and sometimes freelanced articles for Civil War magazines. I'd once worked as a waiter, and at twenty-eight, which was Hodge's age, I'd been a freelancer, too, although writing about more recent wars.

Then again, I'd never spent weekends grubbing around the woods in urine-soaked clothes, gnawing on salt pork and bloating in the road. Not that my own behavior was altogether explicable, sitting

here in a crooked house in the hills of Virginia, poring over sketches of long-dead Confederates. I was born seven years after the last rebel soldier, Pleasant Crump, died at home in Lincoln, Alabama. I was raised in Maryland, a border state in the Civil War that now belonged to the "Mid-Atlantic States," a sort of regionless buffer between North and South. Nor did I have blood ties to the War. My forebears were digging potatoes and studying Torah between Minsk and Pinsk when Pleasant Crump trudged through Virginia with the 10th Alabama.

I took out the card Robert Lee Hodge had given me. It was colored Confederate gray; the phone number ended in 1865. Muskets crackled outside and shrieks of mock pain filled the air. Why did this war still obsess so many Americans 130 years after Appomattox? I returned to Poppa Isaac's book. What did that war have to do with him, or with me?

A FEW WEEKS LATER I gave Rob Hodge a call. He seemed unsurprised to hear from me and renewed his offer to take me out in the field. Hodge's unit, the Southern Guard, was about to hold a drill to keep its skills sharp during the long winter layoff (battle reenactments, like real Civil War combat, clustered between spring and fall). "It'll be forty-eight hours of hardcore marching," he said. "Wanna come?"

Hodge gave me the number for the Guardsman hosting the event, a Virginia farmer named Robert Young. I called for directions and also asked what to bring. "I've got a sleeping bag," I told him. The voice on the other end went silent. "Or some blankets," I added.

"You'll be issued a bedroll and other kit as needed," Young said. "Bring food, but nothing modern. Absolutely no plastic." He suggested I arrive early so he could check out my gear.

I donned an old-fashioned pair of one-piece long johns known as a union suit (which sounded Civil War-ish), a pair of faded button-fly jeans, muddy work boots, and a rough cotton shirt a hippie girlfriend had given me years before. Ignorant of nineteenth-century food packaging, I tossed a hunk of cheese and a few apples into a leather shoulder bag, along with a rusty canteen and camping knife.

Surely the others would share their grub. I imagined the Guardsmen gathered round a crackling bonfire, talking about the homefront while slicing potatoes into a bubbling Irish stew.

Two young Confederates stood guard at the entrance to the drill site, a 400-acre farm in the bucolic horse country of the Virginia Piedmont. One was my host, Robert Young. He welcomed me with a curt nod and a full-body frisk for twentieth-century contraband. The apples had to go; they were shiny Granny Smiths, nothing like the mottled fruit of the 1860s. The knife and canteen and shoulder bag also were deemed too pristine, as was my entire wardrobe. Even the union suit was wrong; long Johns in the 1860s were two-piece, not one.

In exchange, Young tossed me scratchy wool trousers, a filthy shirt, hobnailed boots, a jacket tailored for a Confederate midget, and wool socks that smelled as though they hadn't been washed since Second Manassas. Then he reached for my tortoiseshell glasses. "The frames are modern," he explained, handing me a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles with tiny, weak lenses. Finally, he slung a thin blanket over my shoulder. "We'll probably be spooning tonight," he said.

Spooning? His manner didn't invite questions. I was a soldier now; mine was not to question why. So half-blind and hobbled by the ill-fitting brogans—boots weren't always molded to right and left in the Civil War—I trailed the two men to a cramped farm building behind the inviting antebellum mansion I'd seen from the road. We sat shivering inside, waiting for the others. Unsure about the ground rules for conversation, I asked my host, "How did you become a reenactor?"

He grimaced. I'd forgotten that the "R word" was distasteful to hardcore. "We're living historians," he said, "or historical interpreters if you like." The Southern Guard had formed the year before as a schismatic faction, breaking off from a unit that had too many "farbs," he said.

"Farb" was the worst insult in the hardcore vocabulary. It referred to reenactors who approached the past with a lack of verisimilitude. The word's etymology was obscure; Young guessed that "farb" was short for "far-be-it-from-authentic," or possibly a respelling of "barf."

Violations serious enough to earn the slur included wearing a wrist-watch, smoking cigarettes, smearing oneself with sunblock or insect repellent—or, worst of all, fake blood. Farb was also a fungible word; it could become an adjective (farby), a verb (as in, "don't farb out on me"), an adverb (farbily) and a heretical school of thought (Farbism or Farbiness).

The Southern Guard remained vigilant against even accidental Farbiness; it had formed an "authenticity committee" to research subjects such as underwear buttons and 1860s dye to make sure that Guardsmen attired themselves exactly as soldiers did. "Sometimes after weekends like this, it takes me three or four days to come back to so-called reality," Young said. "That's the ultimate."

As we talked, other Guardsmen trickled in, announcing themselves with a clatter of hobnailed boots on the path outside. Rob Hodge arrived and greeted his comrades with a pained grin. A few days before, he'd been dragged by a horse while playing Nathan Bedford Forrest in a cable show about the rebel cavalryman. The accident had left Rob with three cracked ribs, a broken toe and a hematoma on his tibia. "I wanted to go on a march down in Louisiana," Rob told his mates, "but the doctor said it would mess up my leg so bad that it might even have to be amputated."

"Super hardcore!" the others shouted in unison. If farb was the worst insult a Guardsman could bestow, super hardcore was the highest plaudit, signifying an unusually bold stab at recapturing the Civil War.

Many of the Guardsmen lived outside Virginia and hadn't seen their comrades since the previous year's campaign. As the room filled with twenty or so men, greeting each other with hugs and shouts, it became obvious that there would be little attempt to maintain period dialogue. Instead, the gathering took on a peculiar cast: part frat party, part fashion show, part Weight Watchers' meeting.

"Yo, look at Joel!" someone shouted as a tall, wasp-waisted Guardsman arrived. Joel Bohy twirled at the center of the room and slid off his gray jacket like a catwalk model. Then, reaching into his hip-bugging trousers, he raised his cotton shirt.

"Check out those abs!"

"Mmmm."

"Awesome jacket. What's the cut?"

"Type one, early to mid '62, with piping," Joel said. "Cotton and wool jean. Stitched it myself."

"Way cool!"

Rob Hodge inspected the needlework, obviously impressed. He turned to me and said, "We're all GQ fashion snobs when it comes to Civil War gear."

"CQ," Joel corrected. "Confederate Quarterly." The two men embraced, and Rob said approvingly, "You've dropped some weight." Joel smiled. "Fifteen pounds just in the last two months. I had a pizza yesterday but nothing at all today."

Losing weight was a hardcore obsession, part of the never-ending quest for authenticity. "If you look at pension records, you realize that very few Civil War soldiers weighed more than a hundred thirty-five pounds," Rob explained. Southern soldiers were especially lean. So it was every Guardsman's dream to drop a few pants' sizes and achieve the gaunt, hollow-eyed look of underfed Confederates.

Rob had lost thirty-five pounds over the past year, leaving little or no meat on his six-foot-two frame. Joel, a construction worker, had dropped eighty-five pounds, losing what he called his "keg legs" and slimming his beer-bellied waist from forty inches to thirty. "The Civil War's over, but the Battle of the Bulge never ends," he quipped, offering Rob a Pritikin recipe for skinless breast of chicken.

Unfortunately, there was no food—diet or otherwise—in sight. Instead, the Guardsmen puffed at corn cob pipes or chewed tobacco, interspersed with swigs from antique jugs filled with Miller Lite and rimmed with bits of each other's burley. Eavesdropping on the chat—about grooming, sewing, hip size, honed biceps—I couldn't help wondering if I'd stumbled on a curious gay subculture in the Piedmont of Virginia.

"I've got a killer recipe for ratatouille. Hardly any oil. Got to drop another five pounds before posing for that painter again. He loves small waists on Confederates."

"Do you think we should recruit that newbie who came to the picket post? He looks real good, tall and slim."

"Ask him, 'Have you got a Richmond depot jacket? Do you sew?'" A

lot of guys look good at first but they don't know a thing about jackets and shoes."

The sleeping arrangements did little to allay my suspicions. As we hiked to our bivouac spot in a moonlit orchard, my breath clouded in the frigid night air. The thin wool blanket I'd been issued seemed woefully inadequate, and I wondered aloud how we'd avoid waking up resembling one of Rob Hodge's impressions of the Confederate dead. "Spooning," Joel said. "Same as they did in the War."

The Guardsmen stacked their muskets and unfurled ground cloths. "Sardine time," Joel said, flopping to the ground and pulling his blanket and coat over his chest. One by one the others lay down as well, packed close, as if on a slave ship. Feeling awkward, I shuffled to the end of the clump, lying a few feet from the nearest man.

"Spoon right!" someone shouted. Each man rolled onto his side and clutched the man beside him. Following suit, I snuggled my neighbor. A few bodies down, a man wedged between Joel and Rob began griping. "You guys are so skinny you don't give off any heat. You're just sucking it out of me!"

After fifteen minutes, someone shouted "spoon left!" and the pack rolled over. Now my back was warm but my front was exposed to the chill air. I was in the "anchor" position, my neighbor explained, the coldest spot in a Civil War spoon.

Famished and half-frozen, I began fantasizing about the campfire stew I'd naively looked forward to. Somewhere in the distance a horse snorted. Then one of the soldiers let loose a titanic fart. "You farb," his neighbor shouted. "Gas didn't come in until World War One!"

This prompted a volley of off-color jokes, most of them aimed at girlfriends and spouses. "You married?" I asked my neighbor, a man about my own age.

"Uh huh. Two kids." I asked how his family felt about his hobby. "If it wasn't this, it'd be golf or something," he said. He propped on one elbow and lit a cigar butt from an archaic box labeled Friction Matches. "At least there's no room for jealousy with this hobby. You come home stinking of gunpowder and sweat and bad tobacco, so your wife knows you've just been out with the guys."

From a few mummies down, Joel joined in the conversation. "I

just broke up with my girlfriend," he said. "It was a constant struggle between her and the Civil War. She got tired of competing with something that happened a hundred thirty years ago."

Joel worried he might never find another girlfriend. Now, when he met a woman he liked, he coyly let on that he was "into history." That way, he explained, "I don't scare her off by letting the whole cat out of the bag."

"What happens if you do tell her straight?" I asked him.

"She freaks." The issue wasn't just weekends spent away; it was also the money. Joel reckoned that a quarter of his income went to reenacting. "I try to put a positive spin on it," he said. "I tell women, 'I don't do drugs, I do the Civil War.'" He laughed. "Problem is, the Civil War's more addictive than crack, and almost as expensive."

The chat gradually died down. Someone got up to pee and walked into a tree branch, cursing. One man kept waking with a hacking cough. And I realized I should have taken off my wet boots before lying down; now, they'd become blocks of ice. My arm was caught awkwardly beneath my side, but liberating it was impossible. I'd disturb the whole spoon, and also risk shifting the precarious arrangement of blanket and coat that was my only protection from frostbite.

My neighbor, Paul Carter, was still half-awake and I asked him what he did when he wasn't freezing to death in the Virginia hills. "Finishing my Ph.D. thesis," he muttered, "on Soviet history."

I finally lulled myself to sleep with drowsy images of Stalingrad and awoke to find my body molded tightly around Paul's, all awkwardness gone in the desperate search for warmth. He was doing the same to the man beside him. There must have been a "spoon right" in the night.

A moment later, someone banged on a pot and shouted reveille: "Wake the fuck up! It's late!" The sky was still gray. It was not yet six o'clock.

The pot, at least, was an encouraging prop. I hadn't eaten since lunch the day before, and then only lightly in anticipation of a hearty camp dinner. But no one gathered sticks or showed any signs of fixing breakfast. I saw one man furtively gnaw on a crust of bread, but that was all. Recalling the hunk of cheese I'd packed the day before—the only item of mine that had escaped confiscation—I frantically

searched my jacket pocket. The cheese was still there, hairy with lint and nicely chilled.

The Guardsmen rolled up their bedrolls and formed tidy ranks, muskets perched on shoulders. As a first-timer I was told to watch rather than take part. One of the men, acting as drill sergeant, began barking orders. "Company right, wheel, march! Ranks thirteen inches apart!" The men wheeled and marched across the orchard, their cups and canteens clanking like cowbells. In the early morning light, their muskets and bayonets cast long, spirelike shadows across the frost-tinged grass. "Right oblique, march! Forward, march!"

The mood was sober and martial, nothing like the night before. Except for a hungover soldier who fell out of line and clutched a tree, vomiting.

"Super hardcore!" his comrades yelled.

I spent an hour watching the men march and wheel as the drill sergeant called out his monotonous orders. "Shoulder arms. Support arms. Carry arms." The field was skirted by a split-rail fence. Just beyond stood the plantation house, a handsome brick edifice ringed by stately oaks; I'd been told the night before that the Confederate guerrilla John Mosby had once climbed out a window of the house and down a tree to escape capture by Federal cavalry. To the west loomed the Blue Ridge, gentle and azure in the morning sun. There wasn't a single modern intrusion. Looking at the scene, I thought about Mathew Brady's black-and-white photographs, and the false impression they conveyed. The War's actual landscape was lush with color and beauty. The sky, always a featureless white in Brady's photographs, was a brilliant, cloud-tufted blue.

The sergeant broke my reverie, handing me his musket and suggesting I practice the drill steps behind the other men. At first, the maneuvers reminded me of learning to square-dance, with the sergeant acting as caller and soldiers taking turns as the lead dancer. The main difference was that a misstep here could result in a rifle butt to the chin instead of a step on the toe. The moves were also crisp and angular, lacking the fluid motion of a reel or do-si-do. "On the right by files, into line, march!"

Finally, after several hours of nonstop drilling, the Guardsmen stacked their weapons and sprawled under a tree. Reaching into their

haversacks, they began wolfing down cornbread, unshelled peanuts, slabs of cooked bacon. One of the Guardsmen, a new recruit named Chris Daley, offered me what looked like a year-old piece of beef jerky. I asked him why he'd joined up.

"I work as a paralegal on Long Island," he said. "This is escapism. For forty-eight hours you eat and sleep and march when someone else tells you to. There's no responsibility."

Chris chomped into the jerky, adding, "I think there's a lot of people like me who want to get back to a simpler time. Sandlot baseball, cowboys and Indians, the Civil War."

Rob Hodge agreed. "When you get into the grim details of the War, you realize you've lived a soft life. I think we all have some guilt about that. Doing this is a way of making things a little hard for a change."

This prompted debate about just how hard a hardcore's life should be. Rob favored total immersion in soldierly misery: camping in the mud, marching barefoot on blisters, staying up all night on picket duty. If he caught ticks and lice, so be it. "If that happened, I'd feel like we'd elevated things to another level," he said. "It would suck, but at least I'd know what it was like to scratch my head all day long."

A Guardsman named Fred Rickard went Rob one better. "There's something in me that wishes we could really go the whole way," he said. "I'd take the chance of being killed just to see what it was really like to be under fire in the War." He paused, munching on salt pork and biscuits. "At least then we'd know for sure if we're doing it right."

Fred leaned over to spit out a bit of gristle and noticed something in the grass. "Rob's bloating," he announced. Rob lay splayed on his back, cheeks puffed and belly distended, eyes staring glassily at the sky. Joel walked over and poked a boot in his ribs. "Suck in your gut a bit," he said. "It looks like you sat on a bike pump." Fred rearranged Rob's hands. "They don't look rigor mortal enough," he said. Then the two men returned to their meal.

Rob sat up and wiggled his fingers. "Hands are a problem," he said. "It's hard to make them look bloated unless you've really been dead for a while."

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I stuck out the drill until late afternoon. The temperature was dropping fast and another night of spooning loomed ahead. Better to farb out, I decided, than to freeze or perish from hunger. Rob urged me to come out with the Guard again when the battle season got under way, and I said I would. But there was something else I wanted to do in the meantime. Lying awake in the night, pondering Civil War ob-session, I'd plotted a hardcore campaign of my own. Super hardcore.