

To Make Men Free: A Novel of the Civil War

By Newt Gingrich, William R. Forstchen, Albert S. Hanser

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With *To Make Men Free* (originally published as *The Battle of the Crater*), New York Times bestselling authors Newt Gingrich and William R. Forstchen take readers to the center of a nearly forgotten Civil War confrontation, a battle that was filled with controversy and misinterpretation even before the attack began. June 1864: the Civil War is now into its fourth year of bloody conflict with no end in sight. James O'Reilly?famed artist, correspondent, and former companion of Lincoln?is summoned discreetly to a meeting with the President. His old friend gives him a difficult assignment: travel to the trenches outside of Richmond to be Lincoln's eyes and ears amongst the men, sending back an honest account of the front.

Meanwhile, General Ambrose Burnside, a hard luck commander out of favor with his superiors, has an ingenious plan to break through the closest point on the Confederate line by tunneling forward from the Union position beneath the fort to explode its defenses. The risks are high, and Burnside needs a brave division of the United States Colored Troops for one desperate rush that just might bring victory. As the battleground drama unfolds, this must-read work rewrites our understanding of one of the great battles of the war, providing a sharp, rousing and harshly realistic view of politics and combat during the darkest year of the Civil War.

Praise for the works of Newt Gingrich and William R. Forstchen

"Masterful storytelling." --William E. Butterworth IV, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Saboteurs*

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Editorial Review

Review

“Masterful storytelling.” ?William E. Butterworth IV, New York Times bestselling author of The Saboteurs, on Pearl Harbor

“Creative, clever, and fascinating.” ?James Carville on Gettysburg

“Compelling narrative force and meticulous detail.” ?*The Atlanta Journal Constitution on Gettysburg*

“Gingrich and Forstchen write with authority and with sensitivity.” ?*St. Louis Post Dispatch on Gettysburg*

“Grim, gritty, realistic, accurate, and splendid, this is a soaring epic of triumph over almost unimaginable odds.” ?*Library Journal on To Try Men's Souls*

“With each book… Gingrich and Forstchen have gone from strength to strength as storytellers.” ?*William Trotter, The Charlotte Observer, on Never Call Retreat*

“The authors' research shines in accurate accounts of diplomatic maneuvering as well as the nuts-and-bolts of military action.” ?*Publishers Weekly on Pearl Harbor*

“The writing is vivid and clear.” ?*Washington Times on Gettysburg*

About the Author

NEWT GINGRICH, former Speaker of the House and Presidential candidate, is the bestselling author of Gettysburg and Pearl Harbor and the longest serving teacher of the Joint War Fighting Course for Major Generals at Air University and is an honorary Distinguished Visiting Scholar and Professor at the National Defense University. He resides in Virginia with his wife, Callista, with whom he hosts and produces documentaries, including "A City Upon A Hill."

WILLIAM R. FORSTCHEN, Ph.D., is a Faculty Fellow at Montreat College in North Carolina. Forstchen's doctoral dissertation on the 28th USCT was one of the first in depth studies of a USCT regiment.

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CHAPTER ONEARLINGTON, VIRGINIAJUNE 6, 1864THE ESTATE OF GENERAL ROBERT E. LEEDAWN

“Here they come, parson.”

Sergeant Major Garland White, 28th United States Colored Troops, turned from his labors and looked to where Jeremiah Smith, a private from Company A, was pointing north to the road leading down from the “Iron Bridge” across the Potomac.

It had been raining most of the night, a slow steady drenching downpour out of the east. It had done little to

drop the temperature and now added to the misery of the men of the 28th who had been out toiling by lantern light since midnight. The Potomac was concealed beneath coiling fog and mists rising up from the river, shrouding the capital city on the opposite shore.

The first of a long line of ambulances, emerging out of the mists, was drawn by two mules, ghostlike in the morning light, followed by another and another, mud splashing up from the hooves of the mules and the wheels of the wagons.

“Back to it, Jeremiah. I want it dug straight.”

“Ain’t no difference, parson, we be filling it back up shortly.”

He put a fatherly hand on Jeremiah’s shoulder, guiding him back to the hole, seven feet by three and supposedly six feet deep.

“It’s not parson, it’s sergeant major now,” Garland said. “Do as you are ordered; back down there you go.”

Jeremiah looked at him sullenly, as Garland released his hold on Jeremiah and reached down to lend a hand to Private Thompson, who had finished his half hour stint in the hole.

“Come on, Willie, take a quick break, there’s hot coffee under the tarp.” He helped the private, covered head to foot in warm clinging mud, out of the ground and pointed to where the regimental cooks had ten-gallon vats of the brew waiting.

“Thank ya, Reverend … I mean, Sergeant Major, sir.”

“I’m a sergeant major, not a sir, save that for … the officers.” He almost said, “your boss man,” but caught himself.

Taking Willie’s shovel, he handed it to Jeremiah and helped him slip down into the hole.

“Hurry it up, men,” Garland announced, stepping back, his voice carrying to the rest of the regiment. “They’re almost here, and I want this done right and proper now.”

“Sergeant Major, damn it, it’s like trying to shovel out the Wabash River.”

Garland turned, struggling to control his anger as he gazed down at Corporal Turner in the next hole over. He bent over at the waist, fixing the corporal with an icy gaze.

“Corporal Turner,” he hissed, voice pitched low, remembering it was not proper to reprimand another noncommissioned officer in front of the men, or the officers for that matter. “I will not tolerate profanity in my presence. Next, I will not tolerate profanity on this ground, which is consecrated and…”

He hesitated.

“Damn it, I will not tolerate beefing from someone who is supposed to lead. If you don’t like that, Corporal, you can climb out of there right now, take off those two stripes, and I’ll find someone else to wear them.”

He gazed down at the mud-drenched corporal.

“Do I make myself clear, Corporal, or is it Private?”

“Yes, Sergeant Major.”

“You can stay down there and keep digging until I tell you different.”

Turner said nothing, though the next shovelful up, containing more water than muddy earth, landed within inches of Garland’s feet.

Garland turned away and noticed that young Lieutenant James Grant was looking his way. The lieutenant gave a nod of approval and turned away, going back under the tarpaulin where the officers of the regiment had gathered while the men labored.

Grant had wanted to “dig in” with the rest of the men of his company. As the detail started their labors in the pouring rain, however, Garland heard Colonel Charles Russell, commander of their regiment, restraining Grant, saying that this was an enlisted man’s job, besides, the lieutenant had to keep his uniform relatively unspoiled for the brief ceremony which would commence in a few minutes. Grant was a good man, a three-year veteran of the war, who at heart still acted as if he were a sergeant. He led by example and Garland deeply respected him for that, even though he was not much more than a lad of twenty.

He left Turner’s hole, and continued down the long line—a long line of seventy-one graves.

Seventy-one graves for seventy-one men—men who had died the previous day in the dozen military hospitals that ringed the city of Washington. Seventy-one graves for men wounded in the grueling campaign, which had started exactly one month ago today, on May 6th. Seventy-one graves for men transported back across rutted roads and aboard hospital ships from the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, the North Anna, and according to the newspaper reports, a new battlefield just six miles short of Richmond at a place called Cold Harbor. Graves for men who had survived all that, only to die in Washington and now be buried here.

Garland’s regiment had come to this city from Indianapolis at the beginning of May. Five months of training had prepared them for combat, for battles that every last man of them longed for, a chance to prove themselves, a chance to show that they were of the same blood as their comrades with the 54th Massachusetts. They wanted to show that they were as worthy of the honor of serving as any other citizen, white or black, and that they were therefore worthy of the rights of freemen.

Across the cold months of drills during their winter of recruitment and mobilization back in Indiana, Garland had joined their ranks as the “parson,” but had soon earned the coveted chevrons of a sergeant major, the highest rank a colored man could hold in this army. In their nightly prayer services, he had dwelled again and again on Psalm 91, calling it the soldier’s psalm, and entreated his men to memorize it to prepare themselves for the battles to come. He had promised them battle, and they were eager for it, as ready as any regiment had ever been.

On the day they arrived in Washington, he had still promised it. They detrained and marched down Pennsylvania Avenue to the cheers of the colored in the city and many of the white folks as well.

And then they had been marched here, to this place called Arlington, the plantation once owned by General Lee. Muskets had been stacked, they had been handed shovels, and told to dig—not fortifications, but graves.

He had cajoled them, told them that to do this fittingly was an honor while they waited for the call to join the army on the front lines. That was a month ago—a long month of a dreadful routine. Each evening a telegram would be sent over, informing the colored troops of this and of two other regiments stationed here how many graves were to be dug during the night, in preparation for the funeral train of mule-drawn ambulances that would arrive at dawn.

The digging was done during the night so that this grisly task and the horrific numbers could at least in some way be concealed. That had been obvious to all of them. Bring the dead out quietly; put them in the ground quietly. The number this morning was typical, not as bad as the week after the Wilderness, when the daily number had been a hundred or more. Tonight was seventy-one graves, a typical night for those who died in Washington, and only one regiment, his regiment, had drawn the detail. Only the good Lord knew how many were being buried up on the front lines. There were rumors afloat that three days ago, up in front of Richmond, it had numbered in the thousands.

Once the graves were filled and covered over, the men would be paraded back to their barracks. First, clean the mud-drenched uniforms, then breakfast. Most of the men of Garland's regiment had been freemen living around Indianapolis when the regiment was mobilized last December and were used to hard labor. As for those who had escaped from bondage, the labor was typical of any day in slavery, but a breakfast of fried salt pork, grits, fresh bread or hardtack, and coffee, *real* coffee—not the slave brew of chickory and various roots—was an absolute luxury. But for men who had trained for and had expected war, morale was at rock bottom.

After breakfast they would be allowed six hours of sleep, then fall out for inspection, and a few hours drill. Then the next telegram would arrive, reporting how many graves were to be dug that night. Muskets would be exchanged for shovels and picks, and then they would march down to what had once been the front lawn of Robert E. Lee's family home.

The rain came down in a steady, warm flow; not at all refreshing. Rivulets of muddy water were pouring off the piled-up earth by each grave, following the laws of gravity, and thus flowing over the lips of the graves and cascading onto the drenched kepis, upturned collars, and backs of the laboring men.

Their regimental commander, Colonel Russell, stood with the other officers; he was silent beneath a vast tarpaulin, sagging with the weight of wet canvas. Occasionally one of the company commanders would step out to walk down the line, offering a few words of encouragement, and then retreat back to cover.

Fog had concealed the ambulances, but Garland knew they were drawing closer. They only had minutes left to complete their tasks, and the moment he dreaded came as General Meigs, commander of the garrison of Washington, emerged out of the coiling mist. He was coming down from General Lee's mansion, followed by several of his staff. The men behind him sat hunched over in their saddles with hat brims pulled low against the easterly breeze, which carried the lashing rain.

Meigs slowed as he weaved his way past the mounds of hundreds of graves that had...

Users Review

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