

*For four long years I have learned nothing but
how to kill.*

— *Sam Atkins*

Chapter 1

Durham Station, North Carolina

5th April 1865

Dear Ma:

Please excuse my writing on the back of this wallpaper, but there ain't one piece of writing paper left in this whole dang army. When you send me a letter, please leave half of it empty space so I can write back to you, or else I'll have to write to you on the envelope. Writing paper here is scarce, and right now costs a dollar a sheet.

I got this wallpaper, for writing paper, when the boys tore down the porch of this ol' house for firewood. Don't worry Ma it was an abandoned place. The folks who lived there were

too smart to stay when they saw us coming. Anyway, the boys said it was empty. Either way it was tear it down or freeze. I can tell you, they's a lot of homes 'round here that folks won't come back to no more.

I had a terrible duty yesterday. You remember Rowland, the Indian boy from Cherokee County? You know, the boy what helped us harvest the tobacco four years ago, when the work got too much for Dad and us boys. Well, anyway, 'afore the law was enacted that said, 'you're in for the duration', Rowland served his enlistment and got out.

I guess when he got home, he thought it over and decided his Chief, Stand Waitie, of the Cherokee Nation, and the Confederacy, was all wrong. Anyway, for whatever reason, he went North and joined up with the Union Army.

A few days ago, Colonel Anderson led us on a raid into the Union lines. Of all people, Rowland was one of the Yankees we captured. The colonel remembered him, and that was the end of that.

Most of the boys who knew him were real angry and wanted to shoot him down like a rabid dog right there, but Colonel Anderson wouldn't have none of that. So yesterday they had a Summary

Court Martial. Of course Rowland was found guilty right away and sentenced to death.

After dark some of the boys tied him up like a hog and cut all his hair off. Injuns must not like that 'cause, Rowland yowled about it for quite a while. Anyway, they left him out all night in the rain. I felt awful for him so I snuck out about midnight and gave him a blanket. It didn't help him much, but it sure made me feel better.

The next morning he was rudely yanked up off the ground by Sergeant McCord, and dragged in front of the men. I guess the generals were aiming to set an example for us.

Ol' Rowland showed some kind of courage though. He stood in front of the company, alone and naked, and stared down his captors.

I tried to hide as they were making up the shooting detail, but the Sergeant found me and 'afore I knew it I was standing at attention, my rifle at shoulder arms, with eleven other men.

Rowland was brave I'll give him that. Because of the rain, the grave they dug for him was half-full of water. Of his own accord, he went to the foot of the grave then turned and looked directly at us. 'Boys,' he said, looking over his shoulder at the

water in the hole, 'Give me a drink of that would you. I hear water is scarce in Hell.'

But, the captain wasn't impressed by his heroics. He turned to us and said, 'Shoot the bastard!'

I fired over his head but some of the other boys didn't.

When the minié balls hit him, Rowland flew back as if someone had jerked him with a rope. His face became a bloody mask and he fell with a splash into his tomb.

The sight of him dropping lifeless into an unmarked grave was worse to me than all the other Yankees I've killed, and Momma, I've killed a bunch. God rest all their souls.

You know, if Rowland was an officer, they'd a given him a parole, and sent him on home. It doesn't seem quite fair. A General can resign, and that's okay. A private, that's another story. He can't quit. When he joins up, he can't even choose his branch of service. If he gets a letter from home telling him his family is starving and they need him, that's too bad. Then, if he leaves to help his folks, that's desertion. If you're a deserter, with General Bragg for instance, then it's certain you face the firing squad, jes like ol' Rowland. They's lots of times a boy wants to stay and fight, but his

feet just won't let him. He gets executed too. It don't seem quite fair, does it, Ma?

Well, the army is stirring now and I gotta go. They's no food to eat, but someone in the squad up'd and got some green corn yesterday and we're gonna do something with it this morning. Even if they cook it I don't know how I'm gonna chew it 'cause all my teeth are loose. God, I'd give a year's pay in gold for a piece of your apple pie.

Rest easy about your first-born, my older brother, Dave. I saw him yesterday and he looked fit as a Texas steer. Say hello to Pa and tell your youngest son not to grow up too fast, and to definitely stay home on the farm with you. You sure don't want him to see the things I've seen.

One thing I can tell you, if I ever get outta this army, I swear to you and God, I'll never kill another living thing.

Love, your son, still alive and kicking.

Sam Atkins