

ONE

Corinth

May 1862, Corinth, Mississippi

As far as the foot soldiers were concerned, the other side could have the damned town. The generals might have gladly given it up too, if not for the railroad junction. Corinth was pestilential. Even the Union's pitiless William Tecumseh Sherman said the place made him feel "quite unwell." Sherman's superior, Henry Halleck, had such a low opinion of it that when he fell ill with a bowel ailment, he sourly named it "the evacuation of Corinth."

It was wretched ground for a fight, with boggy fields, swarms of bugs clouding the fetid air, and a chronic shortage of decent drinking water. A Confederate colonel called it a "sickly, malarial spot, fit only for alligators and snakes." It left no better impression on a Yankee lieutenant from Minnesota, who found the locals "ignorant" and the women "she vipers" with the figures of "shad bellied bean poles," he wrote. As far as he could tell, the chief local produce consisted of "wood ticks, chiggers, fleas, and niggers."

But men on both sides understood, if reluctantly, that Corinth was one of the most vital strategic points in the South. It was "the

vertebrae of the Confederacy,” as one rebel official put it. In the middle of town, two sets of railway tracks crossed each other in a broad X: the Memphis and Charleston ran east-west, while the Mobile and Ohio ran north-south. The intersection was a working hive: locomotives screeched and huffed, while men on platforms loaded and offloaded downy bales of cotton, stacks of lumber, crates, barrels, sacks of provisions like salt beef, and other vital war materiel. Trains were the reason for Corinth’s existence: the village was just seven years old and the streets were still raw dirt. The largest hotel in town, the Tishomingo Hotel, was a broad two-story affair with six chimneys that fronted directly on the tracks of the Memphis and Charleston, which ran just outside the front porch.

There were 80,000 Confederate troops under General Pierre G. T. Beauregard jammed into the brick and clapboard town, which normally housed just 2,800 inhabitants. Corinth was filled with rebel wounded from Beauregard’s catastrophic encounter in April with U. S. Grant’s Yankee troops at Shiloh, just a few miles away. The battle, so named for the log church where Grant’s men had camped, was the worst bloodbath in the Western Hemisphere to date, with a toll of 20,000 in two days. “God grant that I may never be the partaker in such scenes again,” one Confederate survivor wrote. “When released from this I shall ever be an advocate of peace.”

Corinth was hardly an ideal place to recover. Contagion was inevitable with such a large army closely confined in pestiferous surroundings, the comings, goings, spewings, and brawlings of thousands of men, horses, mules, and oxen trod everything into mud, and their litter and foul runoff attracted hordes of fleas and mosquitoes. There were not enough rooms to accommodate the wounded, much less the sick. On the first floor of the Tishomingo, men lay on blood- and water-soaked carpets or blankets in the vestibule and hallways. On the second floor, the charnel-house vapors caused some of the doctors and nurses to pass out.

One of the wounded was a rugged thirty-year-old colonel in the 6th Mississippi Infantry, and a future governor of the state, named

Robert Lowry. This peacetime lawyer had been raised in Smith County, one county over from Jones. He had taken wounds in the chest and another in the arm, as his company lost 310 men out of 425. The performance had earned his unit the nickname “The Bloody Sixth.”

Those Confederates who survived Shiloh unharmed were as likely to get sick in Corinth. The rebels were preparing for a state of siege as a federal army of 120,000 under Union general Halleck encroached on the outskirts of town. Men labored constantly with shovels in the sweltering heat, as Beauregard ordered the defenses fortified with immense earthworks. The men dug until they were thirsty, then drank foul, swampy water. Diarrhea and dysentery became endemic. Soon, a quarter of the Southern troops were ill. “The water was bad enough to kill a dog much less a man,” wrote a Mississippi cavalryman named William L. Nugent home to his wife.

Beauregard responded to the epidemic by trying to rally men with rhetoric: “We are about to meet in the shock of battle the invaders of our soil, the despoilers of our homes, the disturbers of our family ties,” he wrote in a widely distributed letter. “Face to face, hand to hand, we are to decide whether we are to be freemen or the vile slaves of those who are free only in name . . . Let the impending battle decide our fate, and add one more illustrious page to the history of our Revolution, one to which our children will point with noble pride, saying, ‘Our fathers were at the battle of Corinth.’ ”

But even as his letter circulated among the soldiers, Beauregard decided to evacuate the city. At the end of May, Beauregard hastily decamped his army and its provisions, mostly hunks of heavily salted meat, for the healthier environs of Tupelo to the west. Beauregard, too, had gotten sick. Suddenly, he did not feel his presence was required in such a swampland. He took an unauthorized leave to recuperate in comfort in Mobile.

With the Confederate withdrawal from Corinth, the Union forces moved in. They found the place a stinking pit. Abandoned food-stuffs and other detritus rotted on the roadsides. A soldier with the

81st Ohio, Joseph K. Nelson, noticed an odd glint in the earth that crunched under the soles of his boots. When he bent down to examine the dirt, he found it was literally moving with insects.

“The Johnnies left behind something for us to remember them by,” he wrote in his diary. “The ground in places was alive with ‘body guards’—lice—and was much littered in places with large chunks of very salt beef. The salt sparkled and glistened in it.”

October 1862, Northern Mississippi, on the March

General Earl Van Dorn was a ringlet-tossing little Mississippian in search of a big reputation. Profligate with the lives of men and impossibly conceited, as suggested by his extravagant twists of auburn hair, Van Dorn openly aspired to “a burning name,” as he put it. He was continually conceiving of schemes that could win him the flaming renown he sought, and his latest was typical.

As an Indian summer fell over Mississippi, Van Dorn about-faced the Confederate Army of the West and marched it back toward Corinth with the intention of retaking the town. His plan was a hurriedly drawn, surprise full frontal assault, and heedless of risk, but that only made it more infectious to some of his colleagues. He was after “great objects,” and that justified the “unusual hazard” of the attack, according to his chief of staff, another overeager Mississippi cavalier general named Dabney H. Maury.

But Newton Knight, a young sergeant striding in Company F of the 7th Mississippi Battalion, felt none of the enthusiasm that the glory-seeking Van Dorn and Maury tried to summon with such verbal flourishes. He was neither free nor proud to be a Confederate soldier.

Company F, made up of sixty-nine men and four officers from Jones County, had been forcibly mustered into the ailing Confederate army after Beauregard’s evacuation of Corinth in May. Now, just four months later, almost half the new men were ill. Fully two-thirds

were absent or on leave, and six had died. At the last roll call, only twenty men and two officers had answered present, Knight among them. Men were sick with yellow fever, dysentery, malaria, and influenza. Or they were just plain sick and tired of marching around northern Mississippi as their vainglorious commanders ordered them to and fro across the sweltering countryside. It was a testament to Knight's sheer vigor that he was on his feet.

Newton was a long-limbed, shaggily handsome twenty-four-year-old accustomed to privation. His wavy black hair curled to his shoulders and was greased with sweat over a tall forehead. A rampant, untended mustache and beard fell below his chin into his shirt buttons. His large, pooling, blue-gray eyes seemed preternaturally sighted and were spaced far apart, which led some to accuse him of eccentricity. He had perpetually sunburned cheekbones and a large jaw clamped hard and slightly off center.

He was rawboned and muscular from habitual work and a life-long diet of sweet potatoes, cornbread, and whatever wild game he brought down with his shotgun. "Big heavysset man, quick as a cat," a friend described him. Men from easier backgrounds found camp life a misery; the beds on wet ground, the foraging and scrabbling for decent victuals, the tramping in all weather with never a change of clothes. Not Newton: hard didn't bother him.

Newton suffered from a different complaint: he was an unwilling soldier. In April of 1862, the Confederacy, badly in need of reinforcements, had passed the first Conscription Act, drafting all men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. "They just come around with a squad of soldiers 'n took you," Newton remembered. On May 13, 1862, Newton and twenty-two of his closest relatives and friends, young men who hunted together, worshipped together, drank together, helped build one another's homes, and even married one another's sisters, had reluctantly enrolled in Company F together, "rather than be conscripted and be put into companies where we didn't want to go," another Jones Countian recalled.

As an inducement, those who volunteered rather than waited to

be impressed received a fifty-dollar bounty. But those who hesitated were coerced or faced arrest. Under the threat of law, “they all came in,” recalled the major commander of the 7th Battalion, Joel E. Welborn, who raised the troop. “I did organize the men as conscripts.” Welborn and the unit captain, his relative J. G. Welborn, took down enrollments until the battalion numbered 760 or so.

At least by joining up together, Newton and his friends could be messmates. Eating together was the strongest tie in the dreary life of the army other than fighting together. Messmates were more than supper companions; they foraged, cooked, groused, sang, gambled, argued, smoked, and killed time together. Over meals, they confided their daily thoughts and fears to like-minded men who shared their wretched experiences.

Mess was a small relief for Newton and his comrades as they moved toward Corinth on October 2, 1862. At the end of the day, the men unshouldered their gear and dropped it heavily. They stacked their muskets in triangles, barrels crossed and rifle butts in the dirt, and sagged to the ground or low campstools, a seedy lot in mismatched clothes and heavy beards. They thrust pipes in their mouths or pulled out newspapers, while around fires, rank-smelling meat stew began to simmer in a heavy black iron pot and coarse cornbread roasted in a black skillet, which an assigned man had carried, stuck handle first in his rifle barrel.

The men griped incessantly about their fare, the dry cornbread cooked in bacon grease (wheat flour was usually too precious to be wasted on infantrymen) and the rancid beef they were issued. The blue-black meat had a gluey texture, and they wondered if they threw it against a wall whether it would stick. “Buzzards would not eat it at any season of the year,” one Mississippian claimed. They joked that the cattle supplying the army were so emaciated it took two soldiers to hold up one cow so it could be shot.

Depending on what the countryside offered, they would enhance their meal with foraged field peas or onions, or fruit plundered from orchards. A favorite recipe was “cush,” a stew made of beef, bacon grease, water, crumbled cornbread, and mashed green apples. But

sometimes they had nothing but dry bread and musky beef, which they roasted in strips on the ramrods from their guns. As one Mississippi captain in another regiment reported, “The discipline of the troop would be promoted by a more regular issue of rations.”

None of their issue was regular. They wore sallow gray-brown tunics and cartridge belts, in which the best-armed men might have a pistol stuck one way and a knife the other. They were unevenly equipped with rifles; some had Springfields with barrels long as rails, others the shotguns they brought from home. In addition to their eighteen-pound firearms, they packed forty rounds in ammunition pouches, three days of rations in haversacks, clanking metal canteens, and mess kits, if they hadn’t thrown them away to lighten the load. Sometimes when a man didn’t have a plate to eat from, he exploded a cartridge in a canteen. The canteen would split open and flatten.

As they ate, the men of Company F commiserated and discussed their apprehensions about the coming battle. They once again debated, as men on both sides often did, the cause they had been drafted into. A few even openly expressed an unwillingness to fight: the outfit was unusually full of independent-minded men who resented conscription and felt no loyalty to the Confederacy, though they had to be careful saying so in front of officers.

A leading example was Jasper Collins, a thirty-four-year-old corporal with a face flat and leathered as a saddle who was one of Newton’s closest lifelong friends. “When there was a fight on, he was right there with my father,” wrote Newton’s son. Collins was considered one of the most knowledgeable and politically informed men in the company, “He kept well posted on business . . . and read lots, on various matters that would come up.” He was from a family of staunch Unionists, who were tough enough to be able to state their beliefs aloud and defend them. His father Stacy had spoken out vehemently against secession, and his six brothers were pro-Union as well; Jasper’s older brother Riley had flatly refused to be conscripted.

Newton’s own convictions about the war stemmed from a combi-

nation of politics and faith. He was a Unionist in principle, and he had opposed the state's Ordinance of Secession. He also questioned the fundamental religiosity of slavery and the underlying basis of the war. In his worship he was a Baptist, and some evidence suggests he was a Primitive, one who tended to believe in the equality of souls, including those in bondage. As he read in his Bible, Acts 17:26: "And God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth."

Newton had resisted serving the Confederacy, to the point that he courted arrest. He declared to the conscription officers that he didn't want to fight and instead volunteered as a battalion hospital orderly. In that way, he hoped to avoid killing men and care for them instead, and to reconcile his conscience with his actions. "I told 'em I'd help nurse sick soldiers if they wanted," he remembered.

His defiance didn't sit well with the Welborns. At one point, according to a fellow soldier, "the captain threatened to have him shot."

Knight simply didn't feel any common interest with the merchants and planters who made up the officer class and who had pressed him into service. The man who had forced Newton into uniform, fifty-one-year-old Major Joel Welborn, was a moneyed, well-connected land speculator with a reputation for crooked dealing back home. Welborn was among the richest men in Jones, the owner of an ever-expanding empire of real estate with a personal worth of \$36,000. A year earlier, he had been accused by his neighbors of fraud for abusing his position as swamp commissioner to seize as many as 25,000 acres of land and resell it.

Newton was a yeoman farmer who had left behind a homestead and acreage worth just \$800, on which he struggled to feed his wife, Serena, and three infant sons. Yeoman farmers depended upon their own sweat and toil and took pride in their independence. But the planter-merchants were contemptuous of small farmers like Knight in civilian life. A prominent Mississippi attorney turned cavalryman, William L. Nugent of the 28th Mississippi, patronizingly de-

scribed “the humble tiller of the bleak hillsides of the interior” who “eked out a miserable existence.” General Dabney Maury more bluntly called them “the worst class in our population.” Colonel Robert Lowry of the 6th Mississippi referred to them as “ignorant persons” despite the fact that he had grown up among them, as his neighbors.

These elites were just as infuriatingly arrogant in the military. Many of them seemed to view their officer status as a prerogative, and the men in the ranks as vassals. They could afford luxuries such as tents with flaps that closed, changes of underclothes, and lavish fare like wheat biscuits. “We are treated here worst than dogs,” wrote J. B. Shows of Company C of the 7th Battalion angrily to his wife in Jones County. One enlisted man described Confederate officers ordering infantrymen around “as if they were a lot of negroes. I am in favor of discipline but not of tyranny.” Still another wrote in his diary, “I only hope that a false patriotism will never again induce me to put myself at the mercy of such damnable despotism as governs the army.”

The chronic hardship of camp life for the Confederate private exacerbated his resentment at conscription. The pay was only eleven dollars a month—when the men received it, which was seldom—not enough to purchase a clean shirt. As their clothing tattered, so did their morale. One angry Confederate soldier “chafed from morning till night” at the “starvation, rags, dirt and vermin” and the “insuperable obstacles to decency by which I was surrounded” and blushed with mortification at his own appearance.

Newton therefore felt little loyalty to his superiors. The sinewy physical giant who wished to remain in the rear frustrated his officers. But if they wanted to shoot him, at the same time they needed him. Newton was popular and held sway over the men, enough so that upon conscription Welborn had designated him fourth sergeant of the company. In fact, Newton showed the makings of a good soldier: he had an unbreakable constitution, an unerring eye through a gun sight, and a capacity for hard marching. He performed his

duties well enough that he was shortly promoted to third sergeant, though that may have had as much to do with the sickness in the company. As a sergeant, Knight was required to study Hardee's *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics* and learned how to issue basic drill commands: "Attention, company! Shoulder—arms!"

Knight's dual roles as sergeant and hospital orderly kept him busy given the poor health of the unit as it moved toward Corinth. Among his responsibilities was dosing his comrades with the standard, crude army remedies for their ills. "I went around giving the sick soldiers blue mass and calomel and castor oil and quinine," he said. "That was about all the medicine we had then."

At night, the field hospital staff pitched a small tent, about fourteen feet square with about eight cots. There wasn't much temptation for men to malingering with medical excuses, as there were no sheets or pillows, just rough-fibered army blankets, and no one had heard yet of sanitizing. Too long a stay on one of those cots was likely to give a man an infection if he didn't already have one.

The next morning, after reveille, the doctors determined who was fit to march. Newton distributed bitter-tasting drafts, made of various powders stirred into tepid water. Often, medicines were unavailable, owing to the Union blockade, and ether and chloroform were too expensive to use on common soldiers. An array of small bottles was lined on temporary shelving, holding herbs and home remedies. There was Dover's powder, quinine, rhubarb, Rochelle salts, castor oil, sugar of lead, tannin, sulphate of copper, sulphate of zinc, camphor, tincture of iron, camphorata, syrup of squills, simple syrup, and an assortment of alcohols—whiskey, brandy, port wine, and sherry. For those suffering with nervous disorders, there was the herb valerian, or perhaps some opium, to induce calm and sleep.

Newton changed bandages, read the Bible to men who requested it, and found water for the ailing. His disposition mattered more than medical knowledge. With death so common, doctors became calloused, and the soldiers resented them, believing they were butchers who "kills mores than they cour," as an Alabaman put it. Captain

Walter A. Rorer of the 20th Mississippi, who had fought at Shiloh, flatly despised them. "There is nothing held by them so cheap as human life, and all seem to think if they do not murder men directly, they are not responsible," he wrote. A compassionate orderly was a wounded soldier's best friend.

But Newton knew he was going to have to fight eventually, whether he wanted to or not. The 7th Battalion was marching in a force of 22,000 men led by Van Dorn on a circuitous route to his great object, Corinth. As part of the 3rd Brigade, 1st Division, Newton was under the immediate command of General Sterling Price, another pugnacious staff officer who craved conflict. He had already led Newton into battle once, at Iuka two weeks earlier.

Price was a thickset Missourian who stood six foot two and weighed nearly three hundred pounds, with a face shaped like a lamb chop and swirls of white-gray hair at his temples that plunged downward into cottony sideburns. He struck one Mississippi lieutenant colonel as a "hale, hearty, handsome old farmer," and his Missouri soldiers called him "Old Pap," for his grandfatherly appearance. But he had a vehement temperament and was prone to grandiosity. A few months earlier, he had demanded preferment from Jefferson Davis by slamming his fist down on the presidential desk, shouting, "I will surprise you, sir!" His sense of entitlement was based on a widely varied career as a lawyer, hotelier, tobacco planter, congressman, veteran of the Mexican War, and governor of Missouri. He was portentous. When shown the fortifications of Corinth built by Beauregard, he said, "I only saw anything like them but once and I took them." Although he initially opposed secession, he turned fanatic, and at the end of the war he would choose exile in Mexico over surrender.

In mid-September, Price had stormed his men into Iuka, swaggering advising his troops that if the Yankees had "the impudence to come near," to shoot at their knees. But the battle had been a near disaster: they had almost been trapped by federal pincers led by Grant and General William Rosecrans.

Newton and the 7th Mississippi Battalion had been among the last to arrive on the field, shortly before nightfall. The firing had subsided, but he witnessed the toll of it in the dim twilight, and heard it too, from the thousands of wailing wounded. The moon had been full that night, shining on pale corpses and dark humps of dead horses. Confederate losses were as high as 520 killed and 1,300 wounded, while the Union reported 141 killed and 613 wounded. Before dawn, the men had been shaken awake with orders to withdraw. Price, badly outnumbered, had been fortunate that an entire arm of the Union force under General Edward O. C. Ord had remained idle due to an acoustic topographical fluke, unable to hear the sounds of battle from behind a hill. Price seized the opportunity to escape down an open road, and the sleepy, unnerved men went tramping back the way they came.

Ever since then, they had been on a wearisome circular journey. Price had given his men just two days' rest before putting them on the rapid march again, this time to Ripley, twenty miles north, for a rendezvous with Van Dorn and the attack on Corinth. "Without waiting to fix things up and get together our old men we again started on a more foolhardy expedition than the last," said one staff officer.

Capricious weather and the pace of the march told on the men. At first, it rained as Newton and comrades trudged over the steep hills of northern Mississippi. They arrived at Ripley footsore and mud soaked, and with ill will toward their commanders after marching for seven hours at a stretch, "at night thru rain and darkness so black you could scarcely see your hand." They slept on wet ground, with no idea of why they were heading north with such urgency. "It is manifest that Gen Price is fast losing the confidence of all his soldiers," wrote Lieutenant Colonel Columbus Sykes, a cotton planter serving with the 43rd Mississippi in the same brigade as Newton, to his wife Pauline. Finally, the rain had cleared and a high, hot sun had dried the roads. By the evening of October 2, the trudging columns sent up swirls of choking dust that parched throats and made it hard to breathe.

Buck Van Dorn was a “harebrained” and “thick skulled” strategist, to borrow a description from historian Shelby Foote. He had been nearly thrown out of West Point before finishing fifty-second in his class of fifty-six, and he preferred horse racing to the drudgery of logistics, which made him ill suited to lead such a large coordinated attack. By the morning of October 3, 1862, his personal unevenness was catching up with him, and he would emerge from the impending battle facing charges of negligence. In Van Dorn’s haste to get to Corinth, he failed to take into account the undulating, heavily wooded terrain and how fatiguing such a forced march was as a preamble to battle. In his hurry, he also failed to ensure the men had adequate food and drink.

After mess, Newton and the men fell into a short, exhausted sleep. At 4:00 a.m. on the morning of October 3, they were awoken for the final leg of the march. As they covered the last ten miles toward Corinth, the sun drew up in the sky and the temperature reached ninety degrees. The sandy roads were so hot that the men could feel the heat through their boot soles, and dust rose up like smoke. To make matters worse, it was almost completely dry for several miles around Corinth. There was no water for the men to refill their canteens. After a scorching hike, the footsore, dry-throated troops approached the town. The 7th Battalion moved across a broad triangle of ground between the two train tracks, pressing through heavy woods and undergrowth, broken by occasional pastures. Ahead, they could see the outer breastworks of Corinth, full of Yankees.

With a hoarse shout of orders and a jangle of equipment, Newton and the rest of Company F formed their line of battle.

October 3, 1862, 9:00 a.m., Corinth

The 25,000 Union troops garrisoned in Corinth were no happier or healthier than the rebels who had been there. General William Rosecrans, not satisfied with the already formidable defenses, put

the men to work with axes and shovels, building a ring of batteries, large earthen bulwarks mounted with twenty-pound Parrott guns, around the circumference of town. The approaches were littered with felled timber, called “abatis,” to slow attackers. The landscape was one of open desolation, fields of nothing but hacked-off tree stumps.

The northern men had suffered just as much from the heat and impure water of Corinth, with a sickness rate of 35 percent. Their rations were no better either; they existed on salt pork or beef unless they could supplement their diet from the surrounding countryside, already largely picked clean by the rebels. One Iowan who went foraging could find nothing but muscadine grapes. “Had grape pie for supper,” he reported.

Once again, the Tishomingo Hotel became a hospital, and the federal infantrymen believed their doctors were just as incompetent as the rebels did. To Hugh Carlisle of the 81st Ohio, they were perpetrators of malpractice and dispensed the same ineffectual powders no matter what the ailment. He refused to take his medicine. “You must think I am a damn fool,” the surgeon said to him.

“You must be a mind reader,” Carlisle replied.

Many of the occupiers of Corinth were seeing the Deep South for the first time, and they examined it with curiosity. Corinth was a hub for seized cotton, and huge poofed bales sat on the train platforms in front of the Tishomingo, ready to send north. The town was also a destination for “contrabands,” scores of slaves who fled or stole away from their plantations with the Yankee invasion of Mississippi and came to the Union lines seeking freedom. They staggered into Corinth in rags and on bare feet, or rode in bunches on mules and buckboards. “It is all humbug about Slaves liking to stay with their masters,” an Ohio colonel discovered. “Men and women and children run off whenever they get a chance.”

Some Northern soldiers were repulsed by contrabands, and many had, at best, mixed feelings about them. But they were unanimous in appreciation of the fact that they relieved white men of the hardest labor. Contrabands did the most punishing work on the fortifications; they worked as diggers, drivers, haulers and did the cook-

ing, scrubbing, and laundering. An Illinois infantryman wrote from Corinth, "Every regt has nigger teamsters and cooks which puts that many more men back in the ranks . . . It will make a difference in the regt of not less than 75 men that will carry guns that did not before we got niggers."

Contrabands exposed northern soldiers to slavery firsthand and frequently caused men to revise their views of it. Some slaves came to Corinth bearing livid marks and scars inflicted by owners. But external wounds only signified one kind of physical punishment. Joseph Nelson of the 81st Ohio Infantry wrote about a revelation he received on a visit to an area plantation: "We learned of one of the beauties of slavery of which we had not previously thought. A resident here owned a large strong muscular Negro whom he stood as men do a stallion, \$100 to insure a live youngster to kick, yell, and suck. Slave women were brought to him and bred, that they might reproduce their kind."

Abolitionists and non-abolitionists alike among the soldiers were appalled by the condition many of the contrabands subsisted in. Yet their treatment by Union troops was often hardly better than that they received from Confederates, and sometimes worse. One Union soldier wrote in his diary wondering whether they were any better off. "They are quartered together in barracks, are filthy and diseased, the small pox are raging among them. If these Negroes cannot be treated better than they are, we ought to leave them with their masters, who can certainly take better care of them."

A close-up view of slavery, combined with the heat, stale camp food, incessant work, and tension of combat, cured Northern soldiers of any romance they may have had with antebellum Mississippi and its beguilingly beautiful plantation homes. One Iowa infantryman who went into the countryside outside of Corinth came to a large manor house, where a mistress supervised two Negroes as they killed hogs. The mistress complained that the flight of slaves had forced her own daughter into the kitchen. The girl "had never washed the dishes until the Yankees had come into the country," she bitterly informed the Northern soldiers.

By the end of September, the occupying Yankee troops had developed a sincere hostility toward their Mississippi hosts. When a Yankee transport on the Mississippi River came under sniper fire from the banks, infuriated troops leaped onto shore and burnt every single thing in sight. “All, all committed to the flames,” a Union captain reported. He added, “They have met a just retribution.”

As Van Dorn advanced on Corinth, he was convinced that the Yankees would not match the fierceness of the Southerners fighting for their home soil. But the Northern invaders were clearly in an ill temper, too.

October 3, 1862, 10:00 a.m., Corinth

Sharp musketry and the humps of cannon erupted as the 7th Mississippi Battalion surged through the woods in massed columns and began a slow but steady progress across a field toward the Union works. There was enough of a breeze to blow the dust and gun smoke away, so that the federals could clearly see the rebels approach; their lines were so long, it seemed they might overlap.

Newton and other men experiencing battle for the first time were stunned to realize they could actually *hear* the Minié balls flying around them. The thumb-shaped lead bullets weighed an ounce or more, and their buzzing whine gave the illusion that they could be dodged. But that was “as impossible as dodging chain lightning,” remarked an Iowa infantryman named Lewis F. Phillips, “for the savage little ‘zip’ noise they made in passing could not be made ’til they were opposite the ear and gone.” Still, some couldn’t resist ducking. When a man put his hand to his ear, you knew one had just missed.

Those who were hit likened the feeling to being struck by a club, followed by scalding water. A Minié ball almost invariably shattered a bone and at best left a large, ugly perforation in the flesh, large enough to pass a handkerchief through. Which some surgeons did, to clean the wound.

The first shell and grapeshot tore into the neat Confederate lines and left sudden gaps, as if the hand of God had swiped men away. Musket fire punched into them and dropped them. Cannonballs ploughed through the woods, shearing off tree limbs and making bark fly. To John McKee of the 2nd Iowa, the man who'd eaten grape pie for supper, the rebels "only came on the faster" in the face of the fire, their colonels in front rallying them onward.

As the 7th Mississippi Battalion pushed ahead into the open field, climbing through the abatis, two Yankee batteries on a distant hill, eight guns in all, roared to life and further cut them up. Their brigade commander, General Martin E. Green, brought up some artillery to answer, and the sound of orders rang out: "Caisson limbers forward!" Newton and the other infantrymen dropped down and hid behind logs, hugging the ground close, while for the next forty-five minutes the two sides exchanged cannon fire.

Men were injured almost randomly in the artillery duel. Hugh Carlisle of the 81st Ohio lay facedown in the dirt next to a boy named John, who lifted his head and wiped a drop of blood away from the end of his nose.

"John, are you hurt?" Carlisle asked.

"No, I scratched my face when we laid down."

A lieutenant said, "John you're hurt, you better go to the rear."

"No, I'm not hurt. I can stay as long as the rest of you."

He pushed back his cap, and more blood trickled down his head. He drew a hand across his brow, and a handful of brains came away in his hand.

"I believe I'm hurt after all," he said. He went to the rear.

Shelling did freakish things. An Ohioan lucked out when a shell struck the visor of his cap, knocking him into a daze and turning half his face black, but leaving him otherwise unhurt. Two Iowa companies were lying under a tree when a cannonball blasted into it and sailed clear through the center of the trunk, showering them with splinters but sparing their lives.

As Newton and the men of the 7th Mississippi Battalion hugged

the ground under the artillery fire, the outfit's lieutenant colonel, James Terral, organized a charge against the Union batteries that had them pinned. He collected a group of men from Jones and surrounding counties and led them in a rush toward the gun barrels. The men scrambled over obstacles of every kind—fencing, heavy timber, and thick brush—under fire.

As the rebels came on, the Yankees cut the fuses down progressively, until shells exploded just three-fourths of a second after leaving the mouth of the cannon. Still Terral urged the Mississippians on. The officer, on horseback, surged twenty yards ahead of his men—straight into a blast of fire. A ruddy-cheeked, sleepy-lidded boy from Jasper County named William Denson Evans watched as Terral was rag-dolled by bullets and fell from his horse.

Evans reached Terral and lifted him up. “Knock them off of their guns, boys, for I cain’t do any more,” Terral said.

Evans helped carry Terral to the rear. “He was shot all to peaces,” Evans wrote. “Boath leges were broke boath arms was broke and 4 or five bullits were shot in his boddy.”

Evans himself lost his left eye and was wounded in the arm, but “we done what he told us to do and spiked the big guns.”

The Yankees would fight, fall back, regroup, and reinforce. The 7th Mississippi Battalion advanced only a few yards at a time. “We would fight them in one position until flanked then take another, only to repeat the operation,” recorded Hugh Carlisle of the 81st Ohio. After hours of continuous fighting, all that lay between the rebels and Corinth was a last semicircle of earthen batteries. But by then the Yankees were “trebled by reinforcements,” observed the rebel commanders, and not only did they have fresh men, they had food and water. The rebels, though they were within six hundred yards of the town, had gone several hours without anything to eat or drink and were utterly played out.

As sundown came, their firing diminished, then ceased altogether. Van Dorn watched the light fade with regret: “One hour more of daylight and victory would have soothed our grief for the loss of the gallant dead who sleep on that lost but not dishonored field,” he

insisted. But he also had to admit that the ten-mile march, lack of water, difficulty of getting into the battle through forests of undergrowth, and the resistance of the enemy had been more than his men could overcome in a single day.

The men of the 7th Battalion had fought for eight hours in ninety-to one-hundred-degree heat, with scarcely a drop of liquid. The hands of their brigade commander, General Martin E. Green, were black with gunpowder. Soldiers sank down on one knee, supporting themselves on their rifle butts. As the sun set, a chill set in, and men who had been soaked in their own sweat all day were suddenly cold.

For the first time, Newton and the other orderlies could ferry the wounded to the field hospital without being shelled. The orderlies stanching blood and applied emergency bandages from out of knapsacks, and helped load men into the ambulance, a covered, horse-drawn, four-wheeled wagon with a hinged rear gate that could be lowered for the most severely injured.

Newton sorted through the bodies, listening for moans and looking for writhing movement. The swampy battlefield attracted the attention of hogs, scavenging for food. Newton had heard numerous reports of hogs eating the guts out of men. He knew what was happening when a hog lifted its head from a body and revealed a crimson muzzle. If the man's eyes were filled with blood, then peace would come soon. Once a hog made a meal out of a man, there was little Newton or anyone else could do to keep him alive.

The survivors were lifted onto the rickety wagon and carried back to the field hospital. Newton assisted Dr. John M. Baylis, another wealthy officer from back home who was the battalion surgeon, as he worked frantically, examining and dressing wounds, digging out Minié balls with forceps, stitching up flesh with silk thread, and amputating countless limbs. There was no such thing as antiseptic, and it never occurred to anyone to wash his hands or scrub under his nails. Surgeons ran their dirty index fingers and bloody implements in and out of wounds, which almost invariably suppurated.

The key to a successful amputation hinged on doing it quickly

to prevent shock and excessive bleeding. But inexperienced battle surgeons like Baylis, not knowing this, often prolonged the process and sometimes stopped sawing to gaze at the twitching nerves and muscles. The soldiers were remarkable in their restraint. To scream was considered cowardly and dishonorable. Those who sobbed were usually delirious in their pleas for help. The severed arms and legs were stacked against the side of the barn like firewood. The limbs signified the pain and suffering of a war that Newton had opposed from the outset, and they must have made the pretty, abstract words of the Van Dorns and Maurys sound not only hollow, but obscene.

Conditions were just as horrifying for the Union wounded at the Tishomingo Hotel, where nurses in aprons seemed to Hugh Carlisle of the 81st Ohio to be “colored in blood from their necks to their hems.” Carlisle was fortunate; a Minié ball had struck his bayonet before ricocheting into his thigh. His bayonet was bent into a circle, but his thighbone was undamaged. A surgeon fingered the wound, stuffed some cloth into it, and poured cold water on it. It was all the treatment he got—three days later, he would pull the dressing out himself.

After the battle, Carlisle lay on the floor of the hotel near the amputating table and watched the surgeons operate through the night.

“They would cut off an arm or leg, take it by the thumb or toe, and pitch it over the porch into the street,” he wrote.

October 4, 1862, 4:00 a.m., Corinth

In the Confederate fields, men hardly slept. While the surgeons worked and the wounded groaned, Van Dorn and his generals plotted their movements for the following day. The rebels listened to the faint noises coming from the Union fortifications just a few hundred yards away—muffled voices, the creaking of wheels, hammering, the clanking of gear—and wondered what they meant.

The ever-confident Buck Van Dorn was sure that the noise meant the Yankees were evacuating. But his officers weren’t convinced. The

man in charge of the brigade to which the 7th Battalion belonged, General Green, had a more sensible impression. "What made me doubt they were evacuating was the chopping of timber," Green said. "There was a difference of opinion among the officers with whom I discussed the matter. I also doubted they were evacuating because I heard the cars coming in twice and a shout on their arrival." In fact, the Yankees were digging deeper rifle pits, piling more obstacles in front of the batteries, and shifting men as reinforcements arrived via train.

Van Dorn, however, was certain he could take the town with a swift early-morning assault before it was fully reinforced. He ordered a coordinated wave of attack on the city's irregularly shaped horseshoe of inner batteries. The main thrust would be a sweeping roundhouse charge from the right, led by Newton's divisional commander, General Louis Hébert, who was to launch the 1st Division at daylight in force, including the 7th Mississippi Battalion. The left would be led by Dabney Maury, whose troops would make a shorter, more straightforward thrust toward the town as soon as he heard rolling fire from Hébert's men. As a prelude, there would be an intense predawn artillery bombardment.

At 4:00 a.m., under a waning moon, the rebels opened up their guns. Fire blossomed from the cannon muzzles, and for a few moments, paralyzed with awe, men followed the courses of the cannonballs by their flaring, hissing fuses. Blasts of color irradiated the black sky with an eerie beauty. "A more pleasant sight one cannot imagine," wrote a Missouri volunteer named Nehemiah Davis Starr. "We could see the flash of their cannon . . . then hear the report and trace the coming shell by their light over the tops of the trees until they exploded." To a Union brigadier, "The different calibers, metals, shapes, and distances of the guns caused the sounds to resemble the chimes of old Rome when all her bells rang out."

But the stargazing turned to fatal horror as the artillery found its range, guided by the Yankee campfires. Messmates were just cooking their breakfasts, frying salt pork or hanging kettles of coffee to

boil by baling wire, as the shells began to keen. Seconds later explosions gouged bloody potholes in their midst. Men frantically doused the fires, and cooks and teamsters panicked and scrambled toward shelter. There was none—the artillery was also firing at the lights in the village. A shell exploded through the doorway of the Tishomingo Hotel, killing a man and wounding two more.

“The scene soon changed and you may believe was less pleasant,” Starr scribbled,

as they noticed the fires which cooked our breakfast and directed their aim on them which was done very accurately the shell commenced exploding amongst us one solid ball struck a man close by me and killed him I heard the ball coming through the air rattling in the branches of the trees and knew that it must fall very near us . . . by this time we had put out the fires which made it much darker than it was before, two men were wounded on the right of our breakfast table; I was almost persuaded to be a Christian Coward and run, but seeing all our contraband Negroes had run away from their duty, and not wishing to be likened unto a contraband I remained, and had part of their work to do in loading our desks, boxes, mess chests, etc. on the wagons.

The Union’s siege guns began to return fire, the batteries opening up with such concerted force it seemed to cause the ground to shift. Lewis Phillips of the 4th Iowa “actually believed the earth to be dropping from under our feet.”

Newton had been awakened by the thunder of the artillery duel, and in this unholy noise he and the rest of the 7th Mississippi Battalion fell back under the cover of a hill to cook some rations, along with their general, Martin Green. But just as they dug into their breakfasts, Union guns found them and shellfire rained down, plowing up dirt. It would be another long, hungry, thirsty day.

As the sky brightened, Van Dorn waited for Hébert’s infantry attack to launch. But only silence came from the battlefield. Eventu-

ally, light musket fire began to ripple from Dabney Maury's side of the line; his skirmishers were engaged. But Hébert's attack had not begun. He failed to respond to three separate inquiries. Van Dorn was at a loss. Where was he?

At last, at 7:00 a.m., Hébert appeared, pale, to report that he was sick and could not take the field. His inexplicable behavior was later variously rumored to be the result of drunkenness, or cowardice, but it was irrelevant. In either case, he left the Confederate assault in chaos. "I regretted to observe that my whole plan of attack was by this unfortunate delay disarranged," Van Dorn reported, in an understatement. Van Dorn speedily revised the order of command: the next senior officer, Martin Green, would take charge of the attack.

Green was still covering his head and trying to eat under shell-fire when a message arrived informing him Hébert was ill and he was now in command of the entire division. The message left Green "hopelessly bewildered," another officer observed. Hébert may not have been drunk or cowardly, but he was surely sloppy: he had failed to give his subordinates any information, preparation, direction, or even orders.

Green was unprepared to assume command of the division. He looked like what he was, a businessman, who at the outbreak of war operated a sawmill in Lewis County, Missouri. "A kind-hearted, unostentatious man," Lieutenant Colonel Columbus Sykes of the 43rd Mississippi described him. He had a long, bony face, elongated further by a split, gauzy white beard. As he tried to cope with the sudden pressure of organizing five brigades comprised of several thousand men into a massive attack, he radiated uncertainty. Two hours passed as he hesitantly realigned his troops—a feat, given the flaming leaden debris that was raining down on them.

Newton and the men of the 7th Mississippi Battalion found their places in the line. They would advance across the triangle of ground formed by the two intersecting railroad lines and form the innermost muscle of the sweeping Confederate roundhouse punch, aimed at the crossroads in town. Their path would take them between two

of the largest Union gun fortifications, one named Battery Powell and the other Battery Robinett. Ahead, the men could see the Union positions, “bristling with artillery and strongly supported by infantry,” Green reported.

Green ordered the men forward. “With a wild shout,” the Mississippians leaped across a railroad cut with the rest of the brigade. A command came to charge at the “double-quick.”

It was the last order that could be heard, as at least fifty federal guns opened fire on them. The trembling thunder of artillery was joined by the shrieking, concussive outbursts of shells and the short, almost muffled *spat-spat-spat* of Springfield rifles, hammers hitting soft gunpowder, followed by the metallic raking of ramrods. “The very atmosphere seemed filled with shot, shell, grape and canister,” Green reported.

Suddenly it seemed as if they were in a rainstorm of blood. Horses plunged and caterwauled, and men screamed incoherently. There was something about such a charge that forced the breath from men’s throats, almost reflexively, without their even knowing it. As one Mississippi soldier recorded in his diary, “I always said, if I ever went into a charge, I wouldn’t holler. But the very first time I fired off my gun, I hollered as loud as I could, and I hollered every breath until I stopped!”

The Confederates sprinted heedlessly forward, over logs and fallen timber toward the Union lines that belched flame and smoke. “Not for a moment did they halt,” observed a horrified Union soldier watching the approaching slaughter. “Every instant death smote. It came in a hundred shapes, every shape a separate horror. Here a shell, short-fused, exploding in the thinning ranks, would rend its victims and splatter their comrades with brains, flesh and blood. Men’s heads were blown to atoms. Fragments of human flesh still quivering with life would slap other men in the face, or fall to earth to be trampled underfoot.”

One of Newton’s oldest friends, John Harper, fell wounded in both feet. Another Jones County man, James Reddoch, was shot through the jaw.

But the Union artillery simply couldn't fire rapidly enough to slow the onslaught. As the rebels charged over the killing field, some Northerners flinched and broke even before their lines were struck. Horses stampeded with their limbers on, dragging heavy cannon over and crushing infantrymen. Others dodged out of the way but caught the panic of the animals and dashed to the rear through the columns. "Then a few men followed the horses," Joseph Nelson of the 81st Ohio wrote. "Then a few more. And still more." General Rosecrans rode among them, livid, swearing that they were "old women."

The Confederates overran Battery Powell and took possession of the large guns, nesting among bloody cadavers and horse carcasses. Surging just to the right of the earthworks, the 7th Mississippi Battalion roared through a line of Iowans and Illinoisans and straight on into town.

In Corinth, they fought from house to house. Musket fire spattered against clapboards and made splinters and shards of masonry fly, until whole buildings were practically shot away. Years later, bullet holes still riddled the walls of homes. Some of the rebels, famished despite the battle howling around them, slipped into kitchens and wolfed down whatever they could find to eat, only to be set upon by Yankees. "Every one of them received either the hot lead or the cold steel," bragged one Iowan who stumbled upon them. More than one hundred Southern men were captured after the battle, "in the bakeries and stores," marveled another Iowan.

Steadily, the rebels worked their way toward the Tishomingo Hotel. The Yankees used crates and barrels on the train platforms for cover to return fire. As the action neared Rosecrans's headquarters, his staff hastily evacuated, officers and contrabands alike almost rioting in alarm at the approach of the Southerners. "There was one of the greatest stampedes of teams, teamsters, non combatants and Negroes that I ever saw," Edward Dean of the 4th Wisconsin wrote in his diary. "There were all of our Army wagons with teams hitched up, loose horses and mules and Negroes huddled close together, and they began to run and shout; then they seemed to be

frantic with fear. The noise could be plainly heard above the din of battle.”

But the Southerners had outrun their means. Just as they reached the train crossroads, their brigade leader, Colonel W. H. Moore of the 43rd Mississippi, was shot down. Alone and unsupported in the town, against the entire Federal reserves, the rebels began to run out of ammunition. Yankees, mostly Iowans and Illinoisans, now counterattacked: light artillery poured shot into the melee, shells whizzing over the heads and backs of the soldiers, while Iowa sharpshooters from a nearby low rise picked off men in gray. In the face of such an array of fire, the Confederates wavered, and then began to fall back.

“Our lines melted under their fire like snow in thaw,” reported a rebel captain.

With no choice but to retreat men did so frantically, companies dissolving into fragments. Some of them grabbed at bridles of Yankee horses that were hitched in front of the Tishomingo and swung themselves into the saddles. But whether on horseback or on foot, the retreat was more perilous than the advance. “No description is adequate to picture the gauntlet of death that these fugitives ran,” an Iowan reported. “Very few reached the timber *alive* . . . they had been *cut to pieces* in the most intense meaning of that term.”

All around, the same was happening to other rebel brigades. Just down the line, Confederates assailed Battery Robinett, the largest of the Union gun fortresses, with catastrophic results. Robinett was a stout earthen and log redan near the Memphis and Charleston rail line, with three Parrott guns atop it, masked by two enormous oak trees.

Almost 1,900 rebels attacked the battery three times, led by Colonel William P. Rogers of the 2nd Texas, astride his horse. On the third charge, the rebels screamed through a shallow ravine and came up the steep bank at a dead run. At fifty yards, the Yankees sprang up and fired, mowing them down in hundreds. The rebels still reached the base of the battery, where they clustered in a ditch

at the foot of the bulwark and climbed upward in a hand-to-hand, musket-swinging death struggle. Men used their bayonets “like pitch forks,” and stabbed each other through. Rogers spurred his black mare up the incline, but “he had no more than straightened up until he was full of bullet holes,” according to one Iowan. He toppled backward into the ditch. In just a few minutes, 272 Southerners fell, killed or wounded around Robinett.

It was all over before noon. “My God, my boys are running!” Sterling Price cried, as the men retreated to the tree lines and railroad cuts, the same ones they had charged out of with a yell just two hours earlier.

Soon, the army was in full retreat. Some men ran heedlessly, others ignored orders and dropped to the ground exhausted, sitting where they were, sullenly, with their backs against tree trunks, to be taken prisoners later by Yankees. Others collapsed to their hands and knees and retched. It was a common occurrence after a charge and repulse: often men were ill from slaughter. A Mississippi private remembered that after one foray, he “ ‘vomited like a very dog’ & . . . threw myself [down] completely prostrated, upon the ground, panting with the white slime running from my mouth.”

As the Confederates withdrew back into the heavy woods, Union soldiers surveyed fields blanketed with casualties. “There was hardly a spot for a hundred acres but what there lay the dead of the Secesh,” observed Alonzo Courtney of the 63rd Ohio. At Batteries Powell and Robinett, bodies lay crumpled, heaped, and tangled together on the ramparts, arms thrown over legs, legs over hips.

In the ditch before Robinett, Union soldiers found the corpse of Rogers. They propped him up for a photo, his eyes open and staring at the sky, his beard and face blacked with powder, his coat torn open, and his sleeves pushed up, businesslike, to his elbows. A young Iowa infantryman counted fifty-four other forms in the ditch with Rogers, including a regimental chaplain, a boy no older than fifteen, and Rogers’s horse.

Soldiers wandering the fields came across odd, spectral images. A

conical shell was embedded in the center of one of the huge oak trees sheltering Robinett; it had almost passed through the trunk, but not quite, its point just showing on the other side. In some sun-baked parts of the battlefield, bodies had turned black from the heat and gunpowder.

In another place, someone had lifted a stiff-dead Union soldier and braced him against a tree, his gun in hand, as at parade rest.

October 11, 1862, Holly Springs, Mississippi

The bloodied, beaten Confederates' trail away from Corinth could be followed by their discarded gear: gray coats, blankets, guns, canteens, knapsacks, broken wagons. To one federal, there was "evidence of great demoralization, in the way their arms and equipment were strewn upon the road. More and more was to be seen as we advanced. Finally their wagons were abandoned and much commissary stores were left, until one might think that everything they had" was thrown away. Troops patrolling through the surrounding thickets came across Southerners who simply sat, still, staring into space, and refused to move.

Van Dorn, distraught with the epic extent of his failure and frantic to recover, considered turning around and trying another assault. His generals furiously argued him out of it. Price thought Van Dorn was almost crazed, his mind "rendered desperate by misfortune," and Maury accused him of loving danger for its own sake. As it was, the army was hard-pressed to recross the Hatchie River without getting cut off. Only the slowness of Rosecrans's pursuit allowed them to get away, and not before another 452 men were lost. The rebels worked desperately to lay planks over an old dam, and from there, they slogged disconsolately through rain, back toward their headquarters at Holly Springs.

The battle of Corinth was one of the most costly of the war for the South. A number of Confederate companies were "almost an-

nihilated,” and Van Dorn’s army was “shattered.” In two days of fighting, he had wrecked two of his three divisions and suffered a horrifying casualty rate of 35 percent. In some places “the dead bodies of Rebels were piled up . . . eight and ten deep,” and in one spot two hundred bodies were arrayed as if in one long, thin coffin.

Strategically, the loss was “crushing” for the Confederacy, as General Grant put it, for it closed off Southern transportation lines, gave Grant control of northern Mississippi, and opened the way for his campaign against Vicksburg. General Sherman, nearby in western Tennessee, heard Southerners “openly admit that their cause had sustained a death-blow.”

But to Newton and the other infantrymen who trudged into Camp Rogers at Holly Springs, the loss was more personal. They were past endurance, done in with fatigue, disheartened, and filled with disgust at their officers. Van Dorn was to be court-martialed: there was talk that he had been drunk. Other commanders had been incompetent. During the retreat soldiers were marched in the wrong direction and then countermarched, and many were half-starved for want of food. Even when they reached camp at Holly Springs, there were shortages of everything, including tents. Worst of all, some of the wounded had been abandoned or lay uncared for.

A train, at least five cars long, was left overnight full of men with undressed wounds, some without blankets, and all of them with nothing to eat. They were unattended and no one could find an officer. A lieutenant discovered them at about ten or eleven at night by happenstance.

Van Dorn was acquitted in the court-martial, but it was obvious from testimony that he had treated his troops as if they were toy soldiers and that his slipshod logistical work had caused needless suffering. One of those who testified against him was Colonel Robert Lowry of the 6th Mississippi, the veteran of Shiloh, who described his efforts to feed his famished men. The rations were “insufficient,” Lowry snapped. By the close of the first day’s fight, “our commissary stores were exhausted,” he said. As they fell back, they were

given nothing except a single mangy live cow, without any salt with which to cure it. After consultation with his men, Lowry drove the poor beast away. His men went two more days without rations of any kind, his pleas to superiors ignored, before Lowry finally sent men out with wagons to purchase forty bushels of potatoes, which he and his officers paid for with their own money.

Hunger only deepened the acrimony. The 7th Mississippi Battalion had done some of the heaviest fighting and suffered fifty-nine casualties. Company F lost a quarter of its men, among them some of Newton's relatives, neighbors, and close friends. His favorite cousins Alpheus Knight, Ben Knight, and Dickie Knight were all hospitalized. His friend John H. Harper had almost lost both his feet, and Harper's brother was dead. Jimmie Reddoch, whose family owned land adjoining the Knights', had a hole in his jaw. It seemed like everyone he knew was in the hospital: Jim Ates, Tom Ates, Maddie Bush, Tapley Bynum, Jeff Collins, James Morgan Valentine, all of whom he had grown up with. When Company F mustered after the battle, Newton was the only noncommissioned officer who reported for duty.

Newton apparently behaved well at Corinth, because shortly afterward he was promoted to second sergeant and assigned as a provost guard, a kind of policing role. But his rank may have resulted from the fact that so few able-bodied men remained.

Once again, Newton nursed the sick; Major Joel E. Welborn recalled seeing him in the hospital at about this time. But in the days after Corinth, Newton and his friends in Company F became increasingly disaffected. It's possible that he and his comrades associated their battle ordeal with the ancient siege of Corinth: classical stories often circulated among the troops, and the tale of the Athenian general Iphicrates, a deserter and a traitor to his country who achieved fame in liberating the city, was an unmistakable connection. Perhaps they recited from Lord Byron's "Siege of Corinth":

*He stood a foe, with all the zeal
Which young and fiery converts feel,*

*Within whose heated bosom throngs
The memory of a thousand wrongs.*

Newton felt a thousand wrongs. But perhaps the most galling wrong of all came a week after the battle. On October 11, 1862, the Confederate legislature passed its infamous Twenty Negro Law. The edict exempted the richest men from military service: “One white man on every plantation with twenty or more slaves” was permitted to stay at home.

Wealthy planters had pressured the Confederacy to pass the Twenty Negro Law in response to anxiety about maintaining discipline on the plantation. Slaves constituted half the population in the Deep South, and fears of revolt ran deep. The law would discourage slaves from running off to Union troops and prevent wives and daughters from being left alone with a lot of Negroes. Also, if planters and overseers remained at home, they argued, they could better see to the crops that fed the Confederacy.

When word of the decree reached Company F, anger boiled over. Jasper Collins was in camp with Knight when he heard about it. “This law,” he said, “makes it a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.” The phrase would reverberate through the South for the rest of the war.

Collins threw down his rifle. “I’m through,” he said. He told one of his officers, “I don’t intend to shoot another gun here.” The officer said, “Don’t you know they will kill you?”

“They will have to catch me first, before they kill me,” Collins replied.

Soon after, Collins deserted. As of October 31, 1862, he was reported absent without leave.

Throughout the ranks, the Twenty Negro Law was greeted with outrage. A farmer from Smith County (adjacent to Jones) wrote to Mississippi governor John J. Pettus: “We who have but little or nothing at stake but honor are called on to do the fighting and to do the hard drudgery and bear the burthen and brunt of the battle, while the rich and would-be rich are shirking and dodging in every way

possible to shun the danger.” This Twenty Negro Law “did more to injure the Southern case” than Lincoln’s recently announced Emancipation Proclamation, he insisted.

Newton lived not on a plantation, but in the upcountry; he wasn’t a planter, he was a herder and farmer who owned no slaves. Yeomen made up the vast ranks of Confederate soldiers doing the bitterest fighting—and from this point onward, they would also make up the ranks of deserters and resisters. The Twenty Negro Law was written exclusively for the planter class, not for the infantrymen. As one Alabama yeoman farmer said, “All tha want is to git you . . . to fight for their infurnal negroes and after you do their fightin’ you may kiss their hine parts for o tha care.”

What little loyalty Newton had to the army was utterly gone. “He felt that the law was not fair,” his neighbor Ben Graves said. “That it enabled the rich man to evade service and that it was not right to ask him to risk his life for people who rated themselves so far above him.”

All told, in the months after Corinth about seven thousand men in southeastern Mississippi went absent without leave. Whole companies vanished into the woods. Some of them were merely frustrated and would eventually return to the ranks out of guilt, or loyalty. Others were captured and forced back.

With Jasper Collins already departed, Newton grappled with his own conscience. Desertion was an act of shame, according to traditional understandings of loyalty and honor. But he surely wondered if the dishonor of desertion could be any worse than the dishonor he suffered as a Confederate. He wasn’t the only one who was thinking this way: between the battle of Corinth and the turning of the New Year, men from Company F deserted in droves. A muster roll for February 28, 1863, listed thirty-nine of them as AWOL.

There were also practical reasons for the massive desertions that fall and winter: 1862 was a horrible crop year, especially in the hill country, where a summer drought had destroyed much of the food in the fields. Rich planters could survive a bad year, but not poor farm-

ers. Worries over crops, winter food stores, and the welfare of their families hastened soldiers home.

At the same time, the Confederacy passed yet another egregious law: a tax in kind. This gave officials the authority to enter farmers' storehouses and walk off with 10 percent of their provisions. Officers, or thieves masquerading as such, "roamed the state seizing slaves, horses, food, and even houses."

One month after Jasper Collins deserted, Newton received a letter from his wife, Serena. A Confederate cavalryman had come to their farm and seized their best horse, and mistreated her while he was at it. Serena cried and begged to be left the much-needed animal: it was several miles to the nearest mill and there were children to be fed. The cavalryman cursed her, caught the horse, and got on him.

"This was too much for my father," Tom Knight wrote.

Newton was done with the Confederacy. He did not intend to serve a new nation conceived in slavery and dedicated to the perpetuation of rich men's interests. Jasper Collins led him to the Rubicon, and perhaps the stories of courageous martyrs and deserters at the ancient Corinth gave him the faith to cross it. "I felt like if they had a right to conscript me when I didn't want to fight the Union, I had a right to quit when I got ready," Newton said.

One day in early November, Newton deserted. The 7th Mississippi Battalion was on the retreat in early November of 1862, as it fell back under pressure from U. S. Grant, who was pressing down into Mississippi from Memphis. As the regiment evacuated a camp town called Abbeville, Newton was "lost on the retreat," according to his military record. Somewhere, in all the marching, Sergeant Newton Knight slipped away into the woods.

"While they were there they did their duty the best they could," Tom Knight wrote. ". . . They were poor men. They had no negroes to fight for, but the most of them had a dear wife and little children that needed their protection at home. They came home and did their duty here at home in Jones County."