

Every Birth Begins with Blood

by

William Hiles

Isaac moved through the narrows of Charlestown Neck in the dark, directed by unseen sentries who whispered him along. All about him other men walked silently, a sense of determination and quiet haste surrounding their presence, all flowing into a waning night, toward an unknown destination.

Climbing a steep hill, someone in the darkness told him to continue closer to the harbor. In the distance he saw the silhouettes of warships, flickering lanterns hanging off their sterns. A bell rang, followed by others, as ship watches changed. Beyond them rose the dark mass of Boston.

The richness of turned earth hung in the cool air as he stumbled toward the sound of muffled digging. Low voices came to him, but oddly enough, laughter from a warship came clearer to his ears.

A face in the dark fleshed pale before him. "Here," he said. And a shovel pushed into Isaac's hand. "Start diggin'. We ain't got all night."

He stood shoulder to shoulder with the diggers and bent his back into the work.

"I ain't a farmer," said the one to his right. "My hands are bleeding."

"Shut up," came a reply from his left. "I'm a farmer and this ain't but child's play."

Isaac felt his hands burning. An apprentice cooper at seventeen, he had never fired a weapon in anger.

The snort of a horse from behind. "Boys, quietly," a voice said. "Wouldn't want to wake General Gage over there in Boston, would we?" The rider moved on.

"Who was that?" Isaac said. He peered over the growing mound of soil toward the harbor. "You think Gage'll come?"

"That was Colonel Prescott. Yeah, he'll come," said the one on his left. "After that bloody march back from Lexington and Concord, they'll be itching for a fight. Can't have us sitting here all pretty with cannon enough to send 'em to hell."

Isaac nodded in the dark and renewed his digging with sudden enthusiasm. To the east, the sky already a grey slate. The British would know they were here soon enough.

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It was called Breed's Hill, though not so much a hill as a rise that sloped down to the shore of Boston Harbor. Behind this hill rose Bunker's Hill proper and many an eye, though not practiced in the strategies of war, wondered if it wouldn't be better to be sitting up there . . .

Farmers and merchants and craftsmen, British subjects all, faced the reputation and conceit of what was considered to be the finest professional army known to history. Bearing arrogance and scorn--that additional luster to their arsenal--the British army conceived only victory and at a short day's work at that.

The truth would be known, directly.

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The warships opened fire in the dawning light and filled the sky with preternatural stars in the waning darkness. Isaac, grabbed and pushed from his dazed slumber, fell headlong into the side of the redoubt. Long thunder rolled across the water. The earth thumped and the sides of the earthworks shifted and crumbled. Isaac spat out dirt, wiped at his eyes.

Isaac crawled up to the parapet and caught a look at the harbor before a rough hand gripped his backside and pulled him down. "Damn'd fool!"

The harbor looked to be on fire as the ships-of-the-line gave broadsides toward the hill.

Through good fortune or bad marksmanship, though the din was horrific, most of the shot passed overhead and Isaac learned from the sound--shrill whistle or tempest roar--when to fear and when to merely crouch lower.

"Boats!" Isaac gripped his musket, eyeing the men he'd spent the night digging with, and couldn't keep from shivering.

"You cold, boy?" this from the farmer to his left. Isaac could only shake his head. The farmer nodded, loading his flintlock. "You best do the same," he said.

The British infantry beached their boats and formed columns with unhurried proficiency, and Isaac thought they looked grand, like toy soldiers. Scarlet and buff, long arms at shoulders, the music of drums and fifes echoing in the warming light.

"Watch your powder and balls," a tall, lanky bespectacled man said, passing down the line. "Let 'em come till you can see this--" And then he pulled down the lower lid of his right eye.

Isaac frowned and turned to the farmer.

"The whites of the eye, boy. We have close work to do this day."

“Here they come!” Voices erupted in ragged chorus. The British marched in beautiful long lines. There would be close work indeed.

Fire discipline was a thing to be learned quickly, or not at all, and when the red-coated regulars came full on, their discipline was a wonder.

Gaps in the line were quickly filled. Fire and reload all came with machine-like efficiency. Behind the redoubt, Isaac and the men felt the surge and pull of their own fear and impatience--all held in the heart and shortness of breath by the urging and cajoling of their own officers. “Not yet!” “Hold!” “Let ‘em come!” “Steady boys!”

When the order came it was like a harvest of human wheat. The British line stumbled and fell away under the fire from the redoubt. Blood and flesh created a fine mist that mixed with smoke and screams. They were professional soldiers, but they died like amateurs in the final moment.

The British came thrice in the day and only at the last, with Charlestown off to the Hill’s right, in flames, did they break the redoubt--but at a cost that astounded their leaders. And it was here that Isaac learned that the seemingly bottomless depths of fear had measure. Though he fled the charnel house with those able, leaving the field to the British, every man, on both sides, knew the truth at last: this birthdate, this blood and sweat, was but the beginning . . .

June 17, 1775.