

Ralph's War

By Ryan Gray

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Ah, I hate this!" The thick hand swatted a whiskey bottle down the bar, knocking over two other patron's drinks, and spilling rye onto their shirts and trousers.

"Not, again" The barkeep rolled his eyes, finished twisting a tan rag through a shot glass, and put the clean cup back onto a shelf. "What's wrong now, Ralph? Ain't our cheapest good enough for you anymore?"

"No!" Ralph slammed a fist onto the whiskey soaked countertop, "I's sick a all dis!" He waved a wobbly finger around the room and almost lost his balance, but then steadied himself. "I's sick a being sick all the time, sick of hurting all the time, sick of seeing this...stool." He stood and kicked the three legged chair over, "I'm sick of always feeling like I gotta make water and..."

"Ok, ok, big fella," The barkeep, or just "Keep" as those in town had nicknamed him, slid from behind the bar and wrapped a fatherly arm around the drunk's shoulder. He was a maestro of the misinformed, depressed and over eager youngins looking for a good time. In his early days of pouring drinks, he hated dealing with such rebel rousers or doom and gloom. But as he aged, he discovered that those crazed, young men and depressed, sad men were more than just his meal ticket, but a bit of a calling. The keg tapping counselor guided Ralph to a chair.

But, Ralph was not done. He snatched up the Keep's shirt with a vice like grip and pulled the smaller man to his face. The drunk's eyes bulged and hot breath and saliva chased his words as he used his free hand to rap the side of his own skull. "What I's sick a da most, it's that no matter the booze, it will go after everything I am and own," tears streamed down his face, "cept them blasted memories down deep...." Ralph released the barkeep and dropped to his knees, "I shoulda gone after the right, I shoulda gone after the right...."

"Oh, Ralph, it ain't your fault, there's a lot us that regret and think, what coulda happened."

Ralph looked up from his knees to the face of his friend, "No sir, you don't get it, I'm it, I'm the only one!"

"Well, I don't know about that, Ralph, we all lost loved ones, friends..."

"No, I'm the only one," The drunk slumped lower into his knees and repeated over and over, "I'm the only one", until he eventually collapsed to the wooden slat flooring.

It may have been minutes or hours, the buzzing in his left ear and the spinning room blocked his internal clock. *I wonder why I haven't up-chucked yet? No matter, I'm sure it'll be soon*, Ralph thought to himself. A long shadow slammed open the door to the saloon and strode to him.

The lanky figure squatted on his haunches and tipped his hat back. A silver colt hung from his hip and he sported a dark vest. Ralph felt as though he knew this guy, but through the white haze and double vision the drunk could not recall the name of this hombre. He did make out the tall figure saying. "It was Pickett's Charge, he was the only one to survive his platoon."

"His platoon!" The Keep exclaimed, "I heard tale of one out of a unit, but not an entire platoon".

The newcomer hoisted an arm under Ralph's "Here, help get him up, Keep, would ya?"

The two men struggled to get the huge drunk to the door.

Ralph's wobbly head grinned at the mixologist, "Did ya, know Keep, if I flanked, ya know, went after their right side, 'stead a pushing to the middle. But no..."

"Ah shut it, Ralph, you were just following orders, like the rest of us," The tall man grunted out as the trio hobbled its way down the boardwalk.

"Well Bill, hey your name's Bill!" Ralph smiled with pride and joy.

"Good job, Ralph, you just recalled your cousin's name." Keep groaned then said. "And it seems every time we do this, I have forgotten how massive you are Ralph!"

"Anyways, as I was saying," Ralph raised a learned finger feeling quite eloquent and ready for a debate. "Yes, I followed orders, and that was my..." Suddenly, his stomach took over and did the rest of the talking, right there in public and on the main street.

It could had been worse, however, the woman Ralph's vomit splattered all over mostly got her shoes. Plus, she was the vicar's wife, so her response would have to be measured. A few minutes after the minor uproar, Ralph again blacked out only to wake up the next morning in a strange bed...a jail bed.

Bill! What in tarnations..." Ralph held his head and wanted to scream, but would not risk it. Even the slightest noise might actually make his brain pop like that "popped corn" he just tried for the first time a month ago.

Bill on the other hand, walked into the cells pounding an empty tin coffee cup on the cell bars. "Clank, clank, clank."

"Quiet, please, quiet!" Ralph tried to wrap his ears with the grey wool blanket, from off the thin jail bed mattress.

"Consider this pay back for getting so drunk that you forgot my name, cuz."

"Ya, but you know what day it was yesterday."

"Yep I do, and I also know, life goes on, and I still got folks ta care for."

"You may have been there, but you don't understand, you could never know."

"What, cause *only* half my guys got cut down, but not all of them, I should count my lucky stars?"

Ralph shook his head, "Nah, that ain't it."

Bill balked, "Than what, enlighten me, Cuz."

"You was a 2nd lieutenant, I was a 1st. They was my men! It's my job to get as many home alive as possible, and I failed - I failed, couldn't even bring one man home!" The big man sobbed, "I failed."

Bill plopped down next to Ralph and rested a lanky arm on his pal.

Neither said much for a long while, finally when he spoke, Bill did not know exactly how to say what he felt. For the sake of his cousin, he would try. "Ya know, Ralph, been think'n bout the war lately, and ask'n, what did any of it mean. We all have to face it - we lost.

Cause Richmond was a disaster? Maybe Lee wasn't as smart as we thought or all us in 'ole Army of northern Virginia were victims of our own success, thinking we couldn't be beat. Maybe if Stonewall hadn't got shot by that dult on the picket line or maybe it was that darned

slavery issue those blasted Blue Bellies always harped on about, and God just couldn't be bothered to help, not with the way those miserable, rich plantation dandys was treat'n them poor folks. But now, it all seems to amount to a hill a beans, so I can't rightly say who's to blame for losing the war...cept you, Ralph." At that Bill stood and started out of the jail cell.

"Huh" Ralph snapped out of his stupor and eyed his cousin not sure he heard, what he thought he heard.

"That's right, Ralph, all your fault!" Bill turned and faced Ralph through the cell bars. "That's what you wanna hear, right?"

"Wait, I mean...no.." Ralph stammered

"You want the weight of the world on your shoulders, don't you? You want to roll round in shame like a pig in mud, and tell everyone around you that you deserve nothing but a slow sickly death!"

"No, I don't wanna bother folks." Ralph reeled from this brutal assessment.

Bill wasn't done. "Fine, stay here!" He waved at the jail cell where Ralph still sat. "Live in the cell of yer own mak'n. The doors always unlocked, but you can just keep 'em bars shut anyways, so you'll never have to think about leaving and trying to do something good again."

Ralph stared. The words stung worse than a bullwhip on a wet back. "Why are you saying this, Bill?" Ralph managed.

Bill exhaled and looked down at his feet, "Cause, I just want my friend back. But, don't rightly think he ever come back from the war."

Like a youngster avoiding a whoopin, Ralph avoided eye contact by looking the opposite way, but was open enough to hear what his cuz had to say, "What do you mean by that?"

"Don't know, really, cept maybe you never left the war, cause you're afraid to fight the next one. Fact is, we all gotta fight one war after another. You might think your problems come from failing at the "Charge" or maybe you think your battle's with the bottle. Fact is, the greatest war there is, is in here." Bill thumbed his chest with his fist and looked his pal in the eyes, "Buddy, you're still that soldier who led his men straight into the teeth of the Yanks on 12 separate occasions. You're still the guy who had my back when we was working that Ranch down in Missouri and those Kansas boys wanted to brace me over that pretty blonde, Mary-Sue. You're still a man, so it's time you step up and take on that next fight, cause now than never, this country needs men who are willing to fight and protect what's right." Bill paused and stiffened his back and almost spat out his final two cents. "Way I figure, the only way ta lose in this life is quit'n" Suddenly, Bill stopped, and felt stupid for talking so much. "Sorry for preach'n, don't mean ta."

Ralph snorted at the expository sermon. The big cousin estimated that Bill had just used up his monthly quota of words, and it was only the 7th.

Neither men said anything else. Bill just awkwardly drifted off down the hall to the front door of the marshal's office and muttered something about the stage coming in with the payroll, so he had to go, but that he'd be back. The lawman snatched up a double barrel scattergun and stepped outside the door.

"I'm my own war? I have to fight a war of me? Haha! Bill's finally gone and lost it." Ouch, Ralph cradled his head in pain. "Darned head, always hurting...or should I blame you!" Ralph

thumped his chest and looked down, "Is it really your fault? But, I just keep blaming my head?" Maybe it's a combination? Or maybe..."

Repeated gunshots and a woman's scream interrupted Ralph's internal debate. He rushed out the cells, to the front door and peered down the street about three blocks. Three masked men had boxed Bill up in an ally, while two more were unloading the local mine's payroll into smaller bags.

This was all bad, the sobering drunk thought to himself. Not only will the town lose its pay for at least a month, but the bars closed so Keep and his big spencer rifle or any the other boys won't be handy. Then a terrifying thought hit Ralph square in the brain pan just as he spied his cousin popping out two spent shells from his shotgun, furiously reloading two more.... *I'm it,* Ralph thought. *He knew there was no choice now, he was in this fight, he had to be, it was Bill, his cousin.*

Then it happened, like it did the last time Ralph braced a man who was pushing him, or the time he was gonna take up riding shotgun for the stage, or even the last time he tried to say he wouldn't touch a drink that day...flashes, images, unrestrained and uncontrolled hammered into his thoughts like a steam drill. Scenes from the "Great Charge" poured, uninvited, into his mind as a cold sweat and a thready pulse debilitated his body:

"Pop" He saw his 1st sergeant torn to pieces by an explosion - *Failure.*

"Pop," His flag bearer, went down with a blast from grapeshot - *Failure,*

"Pop" His 2nd lieutenant took three rifled bullets through the chest - *Failure*

"Pop," Johnny, the sixteen year old "good luck charm", shot in the head - *Failure*

"Pop, Pop, Pop."

"Ahh...Enough!" Ralph growled, "Both of you, head and heart," Ralph looked himself up and down, "are gonna find the sand to get back into the fight or I'm gonna gut you from my body!"

He grabbed a colt from his cousin's desk and strapped it on. Loaded up a Henry repeater rifle and stepped out the door, ready to charge these fools and break up this ruckus, when a sudden thought grew a sobby grin on his face, for the first time since July 1863.

Cousin Bill found himself sitting behind two shot up water barrels, being sprayed with water and bits of wood.

The shooting paused momentarily, "Stay down Marshal, no need ta get dead." One thief shouted.

"You ain't taken the payroll, there's good folks relying on that money." Bill hollered back, but then looked down in the palm of his hand. Two shot gun shells stared back at him. *Well, guess I finally gots ta earn my pay.*" The lawman sighed heavily, then loaded his two final defenders, and readied himself to charge the gang.

"Boom, boom, boom" Large rifle report's echoed from between the buildings, down the road a bit. Bill stopped and thought for a moment, "That's my Henry, but how'd it get all the way over there?"

Bill made out a voice echoing through the town, laying down an ultimatum, "Gentleman, I just blew two holes into yer pals with this here big Henry rifle. Now, toss out yer guns and we'll walk to jail nice and easy."

"What a minute!" Exclaimed Bill, "That's my Cuz!" And, the oft drunk'n cousin sounded different, like the old Ralph! The one Bill had been missing for so many years.

The thieves did not care who this guys was, but felt they were too deep into the theft to quit now. One held back to keep the marshal pinned and the other two rushed Ralph, trying to get between him and the money. Most of the cash lay strewn in the dirt, next to the stage.

Ralph invited the rush, with a charge of his own, he stepped quickly forward, rapidly firing the Henry rifle at his adversary, finally catching the robber's thigh and taking him to the ground. From the other side of the stage, the robber's comrade stepped up to the job and drew on Ralph. Ralph didn't grab for his gun, or try to duck, his long quick stride was deceptively quick. Before the thief could complete his draw, Ralph was on him. The sober drunk popped him across the head with the butt of the big rifle and watched the smaller masked man crumble.

Shots fired down the alley, grabbed Ralph's attention, so he strolled up on the last bandit "holding off" his cousin Bill.

Ralph stopped fifteen feet away, but was still unnoticed. He chuckled to himself then shouted, "Hey, greenhorn!" The amateur turned to fire on Ralph. But Ralph was not a gunfighter in a duel with rules, he was an old savvy soldier. He shuffled to his left side, stepping away from the shooters aim. It forced the right hander to chase him in an awkward circle, shooting and missing again and again until he was empty. Then with deliberate purpose and controlled speed, it was Ralph's turn. He drew his weapon, and dropped the greenhorn thief with one bullet, straight into his left kneecap.

Ralph strode past the ailing "badman" but not before kicking the thief's Colt down the dirt alleyway and reloading his own pistol. "Cousin, you still with us?"

"Yep, surely am," Bill stood up from behind his cover, dripping with water and with wood chips strewn all over his clothes.

Ralph finished reloading and slid the Colt back into its holster, "So, you actually get paid ta deal with these low life greenhorn's?"

"Yeah, they usually ain't to bright, but don't matter how good er smart a feller is, if it's five ta one!"

Ralph grinned, as they turned to stroll down and check on the other would be thieves, moaning and rolling back and forth in pain on the dirt road.

As they walked, Bill casually mentioned, "Ya know you got a bullet in your left shoulder?"

Huh?! Ralph peered down at his shoulder, pumping out a small stream of blood, "Would you look at that, cuz, drinking one's self ta death does have its benefits. I don't feel a thing."

"You will in the 'morn, Ralph. But, I have ta say, thanks, for getting back into the fight with me."

Ralph nodded, "It was overdue, besides, thanks for talking me off the edge, Bill"

Bill, once again being challenged by such displays of emotion, nodded awkwardly, and started to walk back to the office to get some leg irons, but stopped with a thought. "Hey, cuz, how'd you know where to get the drop on these dudes?"

Ralph beamed with pride, "Simple, I finally flanked 'em on the right."