

CHAPTER ONE

A Nameless Hero



Robert E. Lee crouched by the cannon, concentrating on his targets, but his thoughts drifted to a wounded soldier behind him. The man's pain must have been excruciating.

It was Lee's first battle, and although he attended to his duties, he couldn't ignore the suffering around him. Here, at the Siege of Veracruz in the Mexican-American War, Lee collected his first experiences with military casualties. The strategy he'd forged with Gen. Winfield Scott now translated into smoke, blood, and crunching bone.

At an onshore naval battery in the dunes west of town, Lee directed the fire. He selected the targets on the city walls and fortresses, and the sailors fired. General Scott's goal was to break down those defenses.

Veracruz lobbed shells back into Lee's battery. The Americans ducked behind the embrasure for protection, but sometimes the shells struck the sailors' heads with an awful thud and decapitated them. It was a sound no West Point textbook ever described.

The man Lee was thinking about now lay in a trench behind the battery, covered with some brush as protection from the tropical sun. An incoming cannonball had shattered one of his legs, and while he was lying in the sand, another ball flew in and struck the same leg, fracturing it yet again.¹

The double wound must have tortured him, especially when cannon fire shook the ground. But the man was stuck there for the time being; he couldn't be carried to the hospital. The officers had ordered that no one leave the battery, not even to fetch fresh water. Mexican fire made it too dangerous.

Hot, thirsty, and in agony, the man never complained.

Later, when enemy fire lulled, the officers deemed it safe to transport him to the hospital. That was the irony of the thing—it happened just when they all thought the soldier would be safe. Men were lifting him out of the trench onto a litter when a Mexican bomb struck him in the chest and exploded, dashing flesh and bone to smithereens. It killed the man instantly.²

To what extent did Robert E. Lee need to process his first experiences of battle? Did the images of Veracruz, and that death in the trench, still haunt him during the Civil War? Or did Lee find inspiration in the man's silent suffering? Two weeks later, he tried to work through his feelings in a letter to his oldest son, Custis:

There was one poor fellow that behaved nobly. His thigh was broke by a cannon ball & he was laid in a trench at the rear of the battery for security, the balls & shells were flying so thick that he could not be borne away. A bush was stuck over him to keep the sun out of his eyes & all that we could give him was occasionally a cup of bad warm water. The men at the guns were hot & thirsty & drank up the water as fast as it could be brought. It was at some distance & the balls swept over the field & at such a furious rate that the officers would not let the men go for water except when they could not do without it. There the poor fellow lay till evening; when they got a litter & was bearing him off, when a shell fell & burst & a fragment killed him. He laid the whole day with the balls & bombs flying over him without uttering a complaint. His sufferings must have been very great, for the battery kept up a constant & brisk firing & the concussion from the 32 [pounders] & Paixhan guns shook the whole ground & must have pained him terribly. I doubt whether all Mexico is worth to us the life of that man.³

The last sentence contains surprising words for a man who later became an American military legend, one of the foremost generals in world history. Was he having trouble dealing with the horror of bloodshed? Or do his words reflect a mature effort to harmonize a single man's plight, and his feelings about it, with the harsh necessity of sending men to their deaths?

When the Virginia Historical Society acquired the letter in 1981, it inherited a national mystery. Who was that man worth all of Mexico? How could Lee balance the highest military goal of the United States against the fate of one soldier and find it lacking? While working through the emotional repercussions of his first battle, did he briefly flirt with pacifism? Or

was Lee holding up the unnamed hero as a model of courage for his son? That one soldier has been an enigma ever since the letter became public.

Lee never named the man. He may have not even known his name.

We can't ascertain what was in Lee's mind, but we can at least crack the riddle of the soldier's identity. The trail leads us back to Europe and to one of its most unusual cold cases—an assassination that went unsolved for decades.

This is the story Lee never knew. It probably would have shocked him.