

-Fort Stevens-

12 July, 1864

“And where are they now,” Lincoln asked. He looked around the telegraph office impatiently seeking an answer for this simple question.

The room was warm, very warm for eight in the morning. Black broadcloth coats filled the room as government officials steamed and waited for the president to say something, anything.

The weather continued to be hot. The middle of July in Washington was normally a hot and humid time, but this year the weather was particularly unbearable.

The president had directed the question to the shirt sleeved, mustachioed young man who stood beside the table on which several telegraph keys seemed to wait for the operator’s attention.

The particular young man was confused by the question as were his elders in the group around Lincoln.

“They don’t who you mean, sir” Devereux murmured from beyond the circle of black coats.

“What? Oh. I see,” Lincoln responded “I mean Wright’s corps. Where is the Sixth Corps? General Grant said they were embarking at City Point two days ago... Where are they? I know where Early must be. He is somewhere between here and the Monocacy River. How far is that? He whipped Lew Wallace there yesterday. He must be getting close now...”

“Forty miles,” someone said, “more or less.”

“Here it is,” Claude said. He was sitting at a table in a corner, leafing through filed telegrams. “Fort Washington signaled two hours ago that the leading vessels were passing.” He looked at his watch they should be here any time, any time.”

“Claude,” Lincoln said. “Come we are going to... wherever it is that Early will try to enter the capital. Where is that?”

Devereux looked at the map mounted on the wall above his head. “Fort Stevens, about five miles, five miles.”

“Let us go,” Lincoln said. “Now.”

Lincoln’s carriage carried them down to the river. A long column of ships were in the river, a few had already tied up in the small harbor.

“There’s Wright,” Devereux cried, standing in the carriage and pointing to a bearded general watching while horses were led up a ramp and over a ship’s side onto the land. “General Wright,” he called out. “President Lincoln is here.” He beckoned and Wright approached.

Major General Horatio Wright stood at the side of the carriage saluting. “Good morning, Mister President,” he said.

His orderly stood behind him holding the reins of two horses. One of them wore a saddle blanket with gold embroidery around the edge. This horse danced impatiently, eager to be off after his confinement in the ship. The soldier holding him pulled his head closer to pet him. The animal quieted.

A crowd was gathering on Maine Avenue to watch the soldiers leave the ships. They were pouring into the street. The columns of fours became more and more a solid

wall of blue. Officers' chargers were mounted, regimental colors uncased. The first ships pulled away from the quays to make room for others waiting in the river.

Lincoln nodded at Wright and stepped out of the carriage to shake his hand.

The soldiers cheered at the sight of the commander in chief. The crowd joined the applause when they turned and saw him. Lincoln took off his hat and bowed.

Wright waited.

Lincoln turned to Devereux for assistance.

Claude nodded. "Wright!" he said firmly. "Take your men up 16th St. Early is coming this way and he will meet the line of defense forts up there about five miles from here. The closest one is Ft. Stevens. There are some heavy artillery troops there and some District of Columbia militia"

Wright looked at the president.

Lincoln nodded.

The Sixth Corps commander mounted the black horse. "This way, he yelled at the nearest brigade."

The column formed on Maine Avenue, faced right and started towards him.

"16th Street is four or five blocks that way" Devereux said to Wright. "Turn right, when you reach it. We'll take a parallel street and meet you there."

Seven miles to the north Jubal Early sat in a buggy on the hard surface road that ran away beyond him to the Monocacy River and Frederick, Maryland beyond. His

advanced guard was scattered among a village to his front astride the road. The head of the main column was behind him on the road. The men were sprawled everywhere in the heat.

Damn, he thought. I should have them stack arms at breaks. Jackson would have done that, did do that. I'm just not all that good at this...

Major General John Gordon walked his horse over to the buggy. The tall, handsome Georgia lawyer looked every inch the soldier. His beautiful wife traveled with the column. She kept his clothes in immaculate condition. Early imagined that his admiration for Mrs. Gordon was a deep secret. Everyone knew, most of all Mrs. Gordon. She would have cleaned up the gruff, scruffy general if he would have let her and if rumor would not have been inspired.

“Mornin,’ Gordon, hot, damned hot”

“Yes, sir. The boys are spread out back there for ten miles. Straggling is bad today. We’ve come how far from Lynchburg, three hundred miles, four hundred miles?”

“More. They’re used up. We should have kept coming from the Monocacy yesterday, but I just couldn’t bring myself to push them any harder in that wet heat. I couldn’t do it. I should have, should have...” Early wiped his sweating, bearded face with the red handkerchief that he always seemed to have. “But, we whipped’em. We whipped’em. Where’s John Breckinridge?” He was referring to John C. Breckinridge, once vice-president of the United States and now a major general of their army.

“Back down the column,” Gordon replied. “What is this place,” he asked while looking at the village. “Tenally Town. Just a few more miles to the White House. Let’s get them up and moving...”

The president's carriage rolled up 16th Street. Devereux urged the black coachman on, threatening to take the reins from him. The man did not want that, did not want the humiliation and he pushed the horses as hard as he dared in the miserable, cloying heat. A cavalry escort had joined them and the little procession clattered along the cobbled street. To the north scattered gunfire was audible and after a few more minutes, artillery as well. People lined the street peering anxiously towards the sounds, afraid that the scruffy killers in brown and gray might appear at any moment. The buildings were fewer and fewer, the open spaces more and more numerous. Down the road the earthen battlements of Fort Stevens became visible.

Early's skirmishers were pressed up close to the walls of Fort Stevens, as close as they could go without inviting a bullet or a shell burst that would maim. Robert Rodes' division was deploying in line to face the fort. Stephen Ramseurs's division would deploy behind them. Confederate artillery batteries hung back, afraid of the big guns in the fort.

Lincoln's carriage entered through the 13th Street gate. The little fortification was filled with blue uniforms and government wagons. Confederate rifle fire whizzed through the air above all those sheltered behind the earthen walls. There were eight large Parrot rifles mounted in permanent rotating positions just below the top of the battlements. They faced north and west.

The president left the open carriage. The door hung open behind him. He walked with long strides toward the northwestern corner of the fort. Recognizing him as he passed, soldiers stepped back out of his path.

Devereux watched him go for a few seconds, surprised at the rapidity of his action. Lincoln started up the wooden steps to the battlements. *He is going up to stand beside those cannon... Every rifle out there will be shooting at the big guns. This can't be allowed. No*, he thought. *I should let him go, let him go...* Even as he thought that, Devereux ran across the dirt and mud of the fort's inner yard. He ran as fast as his ruined leg would let him. At any moment the pain might stop him, but it did not

An officer reached for his arm to halt this pursuit of the commander in chief, but then saw the star on his shoulder and drew back his hand. At the top of the stairs Lincoln stood with his hands behind his back. He was looking out at the countryside north of the fort. He was near one of the big cannon.

The gun crew looked at him, and at the enemy army so close, so near.

Devereux turned to see what held the attention of the president.

Jubal Early's infantry filled the scene with brown bodies from left to right. They stood in the brown grass methodically loading their rifles and firing their weapons at the fort. Their batteries of six and twelve pounder guns were now going into "battery" so that they could shoot at the fort with some hope of effect before they were destroyed. The Rebel infantry was waiting, waiting for the order to go forward against Fort Stevens...

The sun shone brightly. The overnight rain had cleared the air here outside the city's suffocating streets. The birds sang, ignorant of the day.

Lincoln looked at the brown ranks... There were few who wore gray. "They look like farmers. Why do they look like farmers from Illinois?" he said to himself.

Bullets sang around them, sang their old sweet song. Devereux knew that song well. In his inner self he waited behind the mask for the hammer blow.

The blue artillerymen looked at Devereux, and then at the president. They had ceased fire when the president appeared. This was suicidal. A suppressing fire had to be kept up, especially against the Rebel artillerists.

"Let them shoot, sir," Devereux said, hoping to live another day.

Out in the field there were men in brown and grey pointing at Lincoln.

"The "farmers" see us here," Mr. President" Devereux said. "They see you and will kill us."

The heavy artillery battery commander waited anxiously.

Devereux nodded to the man.

The guns roared again.

A confederate field piece jumped wildly into the sky, struck by the lightning from the fort.

"Would that be so terrible?" Lincoln asked, turning to look at him.

Devereux watched a sharpshooter team plant their monopod and lift their heavy English hunting rifle to its level. Even at this range, the telescopic sight was evident.

In a moment, Devereux's brothers in brown would kill the tall, sad man from Illinois.

"Come down, sir," he said. "Mr President. You will die if you stand here. Please come down."

“Get down from there, you damned fool,” someone shouted from the courtyard. It was General Horatio Wright. “God damn it, general, get him off that platform! Now!”

Lincoln heard and stumbled down the stairs into the fort..

“What he hell is the matter with you?” Wright fumed at Devereux. “Get him out of here.”

A tall thin captain held the door of the president’s carriage while they got in.

“What’s your name?” Devereux asked him for no reason other than to have something to say in his confusion over the scene on the ramparts.

“Holmes, sir. Oliver Holmes” was the reply.

Blue soldiers were now falling from the walls with great regularity.

The carriage rolled out the gate.

Wright’s Sixth Corps infantry were coming up 13th Street. They had double timed all the way from the docks along the Potomac. The troops divided passing around both sides of the little earthwork, going from columns into line of battle as they went.

A roar went up as the Union soldiers began to see beyond the massive dirt walls. Early’s men could then be seen.

“Hah! We found ye! We found ye!” some Union soldier yelled at the brown figures.

Devereux prodded the driver. He wanted to get Lincoln out of the fighting. The horse and carriage rolled down 13th Street to the White House.

A half mile from the fort, Jubal Early brooded. He had seen the tall figure on the parapet. He carried a field telescope in his headquarters buckboard. Lincoln was unmistakable through the glass. Claude Devereux was standing beside him in his Yankee costume. He had gestured in Early's direction. Jubal could only imagine that he was trying to keep Lincoln up there until a sharpshooter got the man in his sight. Early had often been a guest in the Devereux home in Alexandria. Claude's father and he had been allies in the Whig Party and had voted together against secession in 1861. Both men had decided after their defeat at the secession convention that their ultimate loyalty was to Virginia. Early could not imagine that Claude Devereux had urged Lincoln to remove himself from danger. He would have spurned any such idea.

Wright's troops were now filling the horizon around the fort in greater numbers. The blue regimental flags were recognizable as the Sixth US Corps.

Early turned to Breckenridge and Ramseur standing nearby. "No assaults. They are too many. "We scared old Abe good, but that is an end to it. We will withdraw to the southeast tonight. Gordon will lead. Breckenridge, you will be the rear guard. We will make big fires and McCausland's cavalry can tend them for a while. John Balthazar holds the door open for us at White's Ferry. We will be in Leesburg across the Potomac by tomorrow evening. They..." He pointed at the blue army, "will follow us to the Shenandoah River where we will wait for them on ground of our choosing and among our own people..."

