“Soldier’s Heart” by Gary Paulsen – Chapter 8 “Winter”

Task: Select at least three vocabulary words and provide your own definition for them on a separate piece of paper. Then write a reflection highlighting the conditions Charley has experienced in his time as a soldier. Additionally, you need to address how he has developed through his experiences. Would you still call Charley a boy? You need to include an in-text citation to support your analysis.

EX: “……” (Paulsen CH8).

He felt alone now. Always alone. He existed in a world that he believed – no, knew – would end for him soon. In the middle of the unit, drilling, eating, listening to the officers with men sitting packed all around him, he was alone.

Charley was one of the men detailed to provide beef for the sick men in the hospital – another school building the army had temporarily commandeered – but there were no cattle available.

“Look to the Rebel horses,” the doctor said. “The men have to have meat.”

There had been a brush with the Confederate cavalry along the river. A Rebel unit had made a discover raid early one morning and had the bad luck to run into a full company of Union soldiers with loaded rifles already arranged in firing order for a defensive drill. The outcome had resulted in many empty Rebel saddles and eleven captured horses.

Normally the horses would be used to pull artillery – the death rate for horses in combat was worse than that for men because they were a much bigger target.

But in this case it was decided to kill the horses to get meat for the sick men, and Charley and three other soldiers were ordered to slaughter them.

It did not bother Charley to kill beef or pigs or poultry but having to shoot each horse in the head and cut its throat and gut it and skin it put him on the edge of mutiny. He had been raised with workhorses and had come to love them. Killing the horses – watching them drop as they were shot in the head – made him almost physically ill.

It was a miserable day. They lied to the sick men and told them it was beef but those men knew. Horse fat is yellow, yellow as butter, and beef fat is white, and the men knew the meat was from horses. They ate it anyway, and were grateful, but the whole day struck a sour note that added to
Charley’s general gloom. At four the next morning, when they were called out into formation to march south, he was in a foul mood.

They had no warning of the impending moment, and rumors flew: There was a big battle coming; there had been a big battle and they were going to march all the way to Richmond; the South had lost the war; the South had *won* the war.

Charley stomped around at first, still angry over slaughtering the horses. But it was a fine morning, so cold that the muddy roads were frozen and made for easy walking, and the troops made good time.

They walked all day – Charley thought it must have been close to twenty miles. After a while the men were too tired and winded to talk and there was silence. At just after three in the afternoon Charley heard the sounds of artillery booming about two miles off.

He had a practiced ear now for the tools of combat and knew from the frequency of fire – a constant thunder – that there were a lot of guns, which meant a lot of targets. As his unit drew closer he heard the rattling-ripping sound of thousands of rifles being fired. Soon, he knew, he would be involved in the fighting.

He checked his cartridge box as he walked, making sure he rifle was loaded and capped, and felt the fear building. Always the fear.

The men marched down a country lane in the late afternoon. At any other time it would have been a beautiful place. Trees lined the roadway and though their leaves were gone the bare branches bent over the road, creating a cover. The sun shone through and dappled the road in light but Charley saw none of it.

The sounds were louder now, much louder, and the chattering of the rifles was continuous.

Half a mile, he thought – it’s just half a mile to be fighting. He listened expertly while they marched. The lane ended a quarter mile ahead in a “T”. Some of the firing was off to the right, but most was to the left. They would probably be told to move left – into the worst of the firing.
For a change Charley was wrong. At the end of the “T” they were stopped.

“Throw down your packs and bedrolls. Carry only your rifle, cartridges, bayonet and canteens. Form line-of-battle to the right! To the right!” sergeants yelled.

The officers on horses dismounted and with the sergeants directed the men down the road until they were stretched a quarter mile, then across a rail fence into a field of grain stubble.

Always a field, Charley thought – there’s always fear and always a meadow.

Once out in the open he could see more of the battle. In front of him, for the moment, there were no soldiers, Rebel or Union, just a field that stretched away a quarter mile to a line of trees. There was no foliage in the trees but even as bare as they were he could see no Rebel troops or artillery to their front.

Off to their left, well away – close to a mile – an absolute inferno raged. Artillery from both sides covered the battlefield with smoke, and the din of the cannon and rifle fire was constant and deafening. Whenever the smoke cleared in small gusts of breeze he could see men dropping by the hundreds, broken and crumpled and falling.

Nothing, Charley thought as he watched the fight, absolutely nothing could live through that, and he was grateful that it was happening to others and not him.

“There they are!” somebody near him cried. “In the trees …”

Charley squinted and saw them. Not infantry this time. But assembling back in the trees were troops of cavalry, the horses jostling each other and kicking as they were pulled alongside each other.

“They’re going to come at us! They’re sending horse against us!” somebody yelled.

“Ready on line!” An officer in front of them walked back and forth with a saber. “Do not fire until directed and then fire at will. On my command the first time! Front ranks kneel.”

Charley was in the second rank and he stood while the front rank kneeled. The horses moved out of the trees, walking forward in a line.
Close on a hundred of them, Charley thought, watching. They’re a hundred and they’re going to try to ride over us. He saw the glint of sun on cavalry sabers and carbines. They were still three hundred yards distant but he could see the shine of horses’ hair and the splash of light off bridle hardware and chest straps. The horses began to walk faster, and then trot, the men holding them in good line.

“Present arms!” officers and sergeants called, and men raised their rifles, cocking the hammers.

“Wait for it… wait for it. Not yet, boys, not yet.” A sergeant in front moved back into the ranks to get out of the line of fire. “Aim for the horses. When you get the command, aim low – hit the horses to break the men.”

More meat for the sick, Charley thought, and felt bad for having to kill the horses. HE didn’t fret the men at all. They were going to kill him and he didn’t mind killing them first. But he hated shooting the horses.

They started to canter. Two hundred yards now. A hundred and fifty.

“Ready!”

One hundred yards. The Rebel troopers were screaming that chittering, high-pitched Rebel yell, and the horses were full out, eating the distance.

Fifty yards. I could hit them with a chucked corncob, Charley though. Spit flying out of the horses’ mouth, hooves rumbling against the frozen ground; we’ll never stop them, Charley though, no way in Hades can we stop them.

“Fire!”

At no more than thirty yards, over six hundred men fired in a volley at a hundred charging horses. The result was devastating.

Charley held high and took a trooper full in the chest, but most of the other men held on the horses and not one animal came through unhit. IN a great cloud they went down, somersaulting, rolling over the troopers on their backs, breaking themselves and the men; and the screams – the screams of
the wounded horses hit by soft, large-caliber expanding bullets, horses with heads blown open, horses with jaws shot away, horses with eyes shot out or with intestines tangling in their hooves, horses torn and dying – screamed louder than a thousand, louder than a million men.

“Reload and fire at will!”

Charley automatically loaded, raised and fired, but there were few targets. Those horses back on their feet were quickly shot down and any man who stood was hit ten, twenty times.

“Cease fire!”

Silence except for the screaming horses and the groaning of wounded men. Charley reloaded, capped his rifle and kneeled, resting. He was thirsty and took a sip from his canteen. He did not look at the horses stumbling and kicking and falling.

Was that it? He wondered – just the one charge? It was nearly dark now – a soft dusk – and he looked to the rear to see where they might camp for the night and get fires going for coffee and heat. He loved coffee, though it tore his guts and gave him a constant stomachache, and he thought of going to the shattered Confederate charge to see if they had any sugar in their saddlebags. There was good sugar in the South and he might find some for his coffee. He salivated, thinking of coffee with sugar in it.

“On the left! Form line-of-battle and wheel left!”

He turned and his heart nearly stopped. Coming from their left oblique, walking toward them in the gathering twilight, seemed to be the whole Rebel army.

Two thousand, Charley thought. Maybe three thousand of them. Marching straight at Charley in a head-on attack.

“Range four hundred!” the sergeants called. “Set sight for four hundred. Fire when ready.”

Charley though it more like three hundred yards but he flipped up the rear sight for four hundred and raised and fired. He didn’t hear his rifle because everybody around him fired at the same time.
Some of the Rebels fell. Not many, not nearly enough. Charley reloaded and fired, then again and again, and each time the Union soldiers fired more of the Rebels fell – jerking backward and down, spinning forward, sitting back with the shock of being hit.

The Rebels had not fired yet but had started to trot. They were down to two hundred and fifty yards and Charley and the men around him kept up a steady rate of fire. Charley fired fifteen rounds and hit perhaps seven or eight Rebels, but most of the men shot high – a common failing when firing on advancing infantry.

They were only seventy-five yards away now. It was nearly dark and the flash from the rifles momentarily blinded Charley.

At fifty yards the Rebels fired and at least fifteen hundred bullets tore into the Union line. Men went down in droves – twenty around Charley alone. His own clothing was hit four times, the brim on his cap sliced off, wood knocked off the stock of his rifle and one of his shoe heels creased.

“Fix bayonets!”

It was to be steel, Charley saw. The men from Minnesota could have run but didn’t; they held their ground, and Charley held with them. With his bayonet locked onto his muzzle, he loaded one last time just as the Rebels hit the Union line.

Oh, he thought, this is nasty work. This is right nasty work. IT was nearly dark and hard to tell uniforms apart in the bad light and the smoke from firing, and Charley did not know where to turn, where to fight. The decision wasn’t his. IN the murk a man suddenly appeared, his bayoneted rifle aimed at Charley’s chest. Charley parried with his own rifle and took the Rebel soldier just below the breastbone with his bayonet. The man had been running so hard he ran himself onto the bayonet before falling off to the side, dying as he fell, his lungs and heart torn. Charley’s bayonet was stuck and he had to put his foot on the man’s chest to jerk it loose.

After that there was no order, no sense, no plan. Charley became a madman. He attacked anything and everything that came into his range – slashing, clubbing, hammering, jabbing, cutting –
and always screaming, screaming in fear, in anger and finally in a kind of rabid, insane joy, the joy of battle, the joy of winning, the joy of killing to live.

And at last there was nothing around to hit, to fight, to kill. He stood with the rifle hanging at his side, his bayonet bent at the tip, his stock shattered, his arms weak, his legs soft, his chest heaving as he sucked air, his throat rasping.

“They’ve run,” someone said. “They’ve took foot.”

“You’re hit.” A corporal stood in front of Charley.

“No. I’m all right.”

“You’re hit there, in the shoulder.”

Charley looked down. He was covered in blood, his arm and chest and pants wet with it.

“Oh…”

“The surgeon’s tent is back there a half mile, in those trees. Can you walk it?”

“I think so.”

“Go it, then. Get patched. We’ll see you later.”

Charley walked in a kind of daze, dragging his broken rifle by the sling. With the dark the temperature had plummeted but he didn’t feel the cold. He didn’t feel anything.

He saw the lanterns of the surgeon and the ambulance drivers and walked toward them. Somebody in a bloody apron stopped him and held a lantern up, lighting his face with a yellow glow.

“Where are you hit?”

“I don’t know. They sent me back. I think it’s my shoulder but it don’t seem hurt.”

“Over there. Sit with that group by the tent and we’ll get to you when we can.” The man turned back to the tent with no sides where a doctor working by lantern light was sawing a leg off a soldier. Near the tent was a pile of arms and legs that stood four feet high and ten or twelve feet long.

Ambulance wagons kept coming with more men, and Charley moved to an area where fifteen or twenty men lay on the ground waiting for attention. Off to the other side of the tent there was
another group of two or three hundred men. They were not moving and Charley realized they were dead.

He sat and waited for the pain to come. Once when he was a boy he’d struck his foot with an ax. The blade had cut a three-inch gash between two of his toes and he’d walked to town to get it sewed up. It hadn’t hurt until the doctor had stitched it up and he’d walked home. Then it had kept him up all night.

He thought it would be the same here but the pain didn’t come. He tried to sip some water from his canteen but it had frozen into slush and wouldn’t drain through the neck of the bottle, so he lay back on the ground. Men around him moaned and some died waiting to be taken under the tent.

Presently – it could have been an hour, a day, a week, for Charley no longer thought in terms of time, no longer really thought at all – the man with the bloody apron came back to him.

“Shuck your coat – let’s see how bad you’re hurt.”

Charley unbuttoned his greatcoat, then his uniform jack and his flannel shirt.

“Let’s see…” the attendant held the lantern up, pulled the shirt away and looked down the front and back. “Hell, boy, you ain’t hit.”

“I’m not?”

“Not a scratch. That’s other men’s blood all over you.”

“Oh.”

“You can go back.”

“Not yet.” A doctor came out of the tent. “I need help here. The wind is making up and the cold is freezing my hands. I need some kind of windbreak – see if the two of you can’t fix something up.”

“With what?” The attendant looked around. “There’s nothing here.”

The doctor looked around, then back, then at the bodies. “Use them.”

“The dead?”
“They won’t feel it. You” — he pointed a bloody hand at Charley — “give him help there. Piled them up to stop the wind from the side of the tent.”

And so they did. Each taking an end, they moved the bodies, stacking them like bricks and angling them at the corners so they would not tip over, until they had a stout frozen wall five feet high and thirty feet long to stop the wind.

When it was done Charley lay on the ground in the lee of the dead men’s wall, just to get out of the wind for a minute and get warm, and slept there for five hours, sheltered by the dead.

Third battle.