

**Excerpts *Crossing the Deadline* by Michael Shoulders
Sleeping Bear Press, 2016**

I look over my right shoulder. Henry's sitting, his back against the wall, cradling his bugle with both arms, rocking back and forth as if in a trance. I hear soft, muffled moans, and he's biting his lip so hard, his front teeth have sliced all the way through. Blood's running down his chin and pooling onto his shirt.

I slap Henry on his shoulder. "Stop biting your lip!" I yell.

...He stops rocking, but his stare is fixed somewhere distant. "Stephen, I ain't going to prison," he says. "I'd rather die here and get it over with fast."

But I know Henry's wrong. I pray, for both our sakes, a Confederate bugler sounds the call requesting our surrender. At least we have a chance to survive a prison stay, but zero odds if we continue fighting. The call for surrender doesn't come.

...I turn to the wall and peer through an opening barely wide enough for the barrel of my gun to fit. I see soldiers move from tree to tree, but they are too far away to take a shot. Moisture runs down my thigh. I fear I've been hit by a bullet or a plank from the hospital. I look down. Thank God, it's not blood. I've only wet myself.

...Major Lilly takes command and, through the roar of explosions, yells at me, "Stephen Gaston, sound ceasefire!" I bring my bugle to my lips, stand, and point the barrel toward the eastern hillside. I sing the words in my head as I play the notes as loudly as I've ever played before, "C-ease Fire. C-ease Fire. C-ease Fire."

..."I can't do it, Stephen," he says. "I'm not going to die a slow death in prison." Before I understand what Henry's doing, he's standing and facing the center of the fort. He takes two steps into the open line of firing. Big Tennessee tugs his arm to pull him back to safety, but Henry yanks loose and looks back at me. "Stephen, remember, I love my wife to the moon and back," he says calmly, and walks farther into the open. He stops, bends over, and retrieves a shiny piece of metal from the dirt. It's my horn. As soon as it's in his hands, a shell explodes just beyond his feet. I duck, but not before seeing him tossed ten feet into the air. The force throws him against the wall of the fort. Bricks come loose and fall on top of him.

I rush over. He's facedown. I pull jagged bricks off his back. Blood pumps from his neck like water from a spring. "Henry! Henry!" I yell. I reach for his shoulder to turn him over and notice he's still clutching my horn in his hand.

"Don't!" Big Tennessee shouts at me, and reaches for my shirttail. I pull away so hard, my shirt rips in his hand. "Stephen, don't move his body!" he screams at me. "He's gone."

Big Tennessee is right. I should have listened to him. I never should have turned Henry over.

**Excerpts “Children on the Battlefield” by Marcie Swartz
Civil War History Center, 2014**

While the Civil War was called “The Boy’s War”, the enlistment of youths into the armed forces was not a new phenomenon in nineteenth century. Generations of boys had served in minor roles in armies and aboard vessels for centuries on both sides of the Atlantic.

... Once enlisted, the boys would perform a number of important functions within a regiment. Some were regular, enlisted soldiers, but others would become musicians, mounted couriers or runners, hospital attendants, guards, orderlies, chaplain assistants, water carriers, or barbers. At sea, they would serve as cabin boys, galley helpers, and powder boys.

... Boy soldiers faced life threatening challenges on the battlefield. Musicians were more often than not unarmed and this could prove fatal should they come into close quarters with the enemy. For many, the realization of what enlistment meant would truly hit home on the battlefield. “As we lay there and the shells were flying over us, my thoughts went back to my home” recalled Stockwell from his experience at the Battle of Shiloh “I thought what a foolish boy I was to run away to get into such a mess I was in. I would have been glad to have seen my father coming after me.”

While there were uniformed underage boys on both sides of the conflict, they rarely encountered each other except in heart wrenching cases like that of Union musician John A. Cockerill, age 16. “I passed the corpse of a beautiful boy in gray who lay with his blond curls scattered about his face,” he recalled as he walked the field after the Battle of Shiloh. “He was clad in a bright and neat uniform, well garnished with gold, which seemed to tell the story of a loving mother and sisters who had sent their household pet to the field of war...He was about my age...At the sight of the poor boy’s corpse, I burst into a regular boo hoo and started on.”

Even boys under the protection of senior officers, like Gen. Ulysses S. Grant’s son, Fredrick Grant, were not immune to the trauma of warfare. “The horrors of the battlefield were brought vividly before me” he recalled from his time in Vicksburg “I made my way with [a] detachment, which was gathering the wounded, to a log house which had been appropriated for a hospital. Here the scenes were so terrible that I became faint, and making my way to a tree, sat down, the most woebegone twelve year old in America.”

**Excerpts “In War, a Lost Childhood”
Los Angeles Times, 2014**

SIBUT, Central African Republic — At 14, Jordy isn't much taller than his gun.

But even though he's only 14, Jordy used to be a soldier in Africa. He said the gun was a way to stay alive. In parts of Africa, children are used to fight in wars. They raid enemy villages to steal things and even kill people.

A gun was a way for Jordy to protect himself, he said.

“I did a lot of bad things,” Jordy said, looking down.

...Charly recalled the day when the rebels arrived in his town. They were the soldiers that were trying to take over the government.

He was 15, and he was selling soap, sugar and other goods from a market stall in Sibut. His father was dead. His mother couldn't support him.

The fighters streamed in on motorcycles and in pickup trucks, he remembered. They fired their guns, and set homes and businesses on fire.

“When they saw I was brave, and I could point out houses to rob, they accepted me,” Charly said. The Seleka gave him a gun. His fear was replaced by arrogance.

“Everyone saw me carrying an AK,” he said. An AK-47 is a type of semi-automatic gun.

The thought of the return to his old life makes him stiff with anger.

“See the shoes I'm wearing?” the teenager snapped. He pointed at his dusty blue flip-flops full of holes.

With the rebels, he had power. “I had boots, a uniform and a gun in my hand,” he said.

“When I saw them starting to kill people, that's when I left,” Charly added.

... Many children don't even know where their relatives are. Hundreds of thousands of people have fled their homes in the fighting. Humanitarian workers who are caring for some of the former fighters can spend months trying to find their families.

When families can be traced, they may be slow to take their children back. Children who have had guns in their hands have a hard time obeying their parents.

Many children still march with the fighters. But those who have left struggle to find a way forward.

Charly, though, already has been approached by armed groups eager to use his knowledge of the Seleka. “With a gun,” he said, “you always have money.”