

Chapter Fifty

Mawhood charged down the road in the Trenton direction. He yelled to the men he passed, "Turn. Turn." The men looked at him with surprise. Mawhood yelled, "Back. Get back. Back across the bridge."

The men of the 17th stopped. Toward Trenton, men heard the order to turn. They shrugged to each other, but they turned. It was an order. Mawhood saw the forward, western-most companies comply. He pointed east, toward Princeton, "Turn." He galloped east and crossed the bridge.

Just about to cross the bridge from the Princeton side was a single cannon drawn by horses, the last of the line moving west. The bridge was cluttered with men, all wearing heavy packs, but Mawhood plowed through them, yelling to the cannoneers, "Get off the road! Off the road! Get that gun out of the way!" Mawhood stopped on the Princeton side.

The cannoneers turned their horses into the field on the Princeton side of the bridge. The gun freed up the path for more soldiers. An officer galloped up to Mawhood. "What is it sir?"

Mawhood pointed to the column of Americans moving parallel to him, due east, but they were hard to see. The officer held his hand to his eyes to shield the sun, and spotted the rear of Washington's column. "Oh, no."

Mawhood shouted to the officer, "They're heading for town. Get the men turned. Intercept them. Wait." Mawhood calculated the speed of the two forces in a minute. "Wait." Mawhood considered, looking behind him at the 17th, and then toward the Americans. He peered closely up the road, expecting another of his regiments, the 55th, which should be on their way. He didn't see them yet. "I'm sending the 55th back to town. We'll make a stand at Frog Hollow. Bring the 17th up as soon as you can. I'll meet you at Frog Hollow."

The officer galloped toward Trenton, screaming, "Turn! Turn!"

The British were a nimble group. Hard as it was to turn a marching force, even if was only 400 men, they all had eighty-pound packs. Equipment, wagons, and horses had to get off the road to make way for the infantry. The British managed it quite well. A few mishaps took place as men marching west collided with those going east, but once everyone had their orders, it was a clean maneuver. They were the greatest army in the world. Mawhood's men were marching back to Princeton.

Mawhood rode into the gap between his two forces. At 650 yards from the bridge, 250 yards from the apple orchard, he spied his second regiment coming down, the 55th. The 17th ambled up slowly from the southwest. Mawhood rode up to the head of the 55th. An officer trotted down to meet him halfway. The officer was surprised to see men from the 17th coming up behind Mawhood.

"Sir?"

"Back up. Back into town. Get your men in front of the ravine, Frog Hollow. Get your guns up there. Send word back to the barracks. Prepare for attack."

"Sir? Attack from whom?"

Mawhood pointed east. Washington's troops were out of sight now, behind a rise in the ground, but Mawhood shouted, "The whole damn Rebel army, that's *whom!* Go. I'll be up shortly."

The officer turned his horse and ordered the column coming up, "About face, left front. Forward."

The soldiers and officers of the 55th repeated the orders as they received them, stopped and turned. At almost the speed of voice, the entire regiment turned and marched back to Princeton.

Mawhood watched them go. He worried about the troops in Princeton, and the supplies, guns, powder, shot, and food, everything the rebels needed to continue the war. If he could slow the Americans down long enough, he should be all right. His forces in town could handle the rebels, hopefully, until Cornwallis arrived with his 8,000 men. He wondered if the 400 troops of the 55th would be able to make it to Frog Hollow ravine in time to slow down the Americans.

His 600 troops in town would also need time to get their guns up. He had the 17th, coming up from the bridge, another 400 men. Mawhood had 1,400 men in all, including the detachment at Princeton, but they were not together.

Mawhood thought about the battle that was about to take place. He looked southwest to the 17th coming toward him, 300 yards away, and then back to the 55th marching quickly toward Princeton. Timing was everything. He called to the lumbering 17th, "Hurry up. Come up."

He continued working the battle in his mind. Washington was going for Princeton, that was obvious. It was equally obvious that Washington didn't know he was there, in his rear, or Washington would be charging across the field at the 55th. If the 55th could get in front of Washington and hold him long enough for Cornwallis to come up... No, they couldn't. And anyway, then Cornwallis would get the credit. Mawhood frowned at the thought.

On the other hand, Washington would probably blow by the 55th at Frog Hollow, but the 55th would retreat into town. When the rebels saw the Princeton guns, they'd hesitate. Mawhood mused at the fragility of the American force. If the 17th could come up in the exact rear of the Americans at just the right time, 400 slow troops, but excellent with the bayonet, the Americans would run like soup out of a broken pot. Suddenly, Mawhood wasn't so eager for the 17th to come up so quickly. He watched the 17th coming over the bridge and mumbled to himself, "Slow down, slow down."

Mawhood reveled at the glory in his mind. The Americans would face the Princeton guns, and then run away as fast as they could when the 17th came up behind them. The rebels would collapse and scatter like jackrabbits, no doubt about it. It was classic.

The war would be over. He'd have defeated the entire American army with his small group of well trained, well disciplined, and superbly led forces, prepared, as always, to defend the realm with every ounce of their unlimited courage. They'd write military journals, articles, and critiques, like "Mawhood's Strategy at Princeton," "Mawhood Saves the Day," and "Have We No Other Mawhoods?" They might even write a musical, "Where Mawhood Stood." The name "Charles Mawhood" would be the talk of London. The ladies at court would be all over him. He'd bypass promotion to general and soar straight to knighthood.

The sun rose higher on the southeast horizon. Mawhood smiled to himself, "Ah, it's going to be a glorious day."

Alas, the fantasy was not to be.

The 17th regiment was strung out on the road, the lead just arriving at the apple orchard, the rear 200 yards behind them. Mawhood could see the bridge 650 yards away.

Mawhood looked south. Behind the 17th, he saw sticks, no, not sticks, they were gun barrels, coming out of the ground, hundreds of them, then hats appeared, dozens of heads, hats, soldiers, ragged soldiers, carrying guns, a whole force of... who? Who were they, and how could they be in his rear? They couldn't possibly be rebels, they weren't in the right place. This couldn't be happening.

Mercer's men emerged from the gully.