

California Rifles at Chattanooga  
(the Major, the Marshal & the Mazatlán)

(draft for preview)  
By Michael “Mig” Gallagher

Dear readers,

I’m posting this chapter from the draft of my second novel in response to your question—“What happened to the characters after *California Blood at Gettysburg?*”

I hope that this preview will partially answer your question and that some of you will identify spelling and grammatical errors, and offer constructive criticism on the storyline. My intent is to preview a few chapters as I complete *California Rifles at Chattanooga*.

Regarding the footnotes, I intend to clean them up before publishing the book, so you don’t need to attend to them.

[Spoiler Alert](#): The contents of this chapter might reveal elements of *California Blood at Gettysburg*.

Thank you for your interest and time,  
Semper Fi,  
*Mike “Mig” Gallagher*

## 2 – Bel Air Plantation, Virginia, December 1863

Roarke and Fred loaded the wagon with wheat, hardtack, and a bit of coffee. They hitched up two mules and drove off Cole's Hill, heading south on the Batna Road. After they passed an abandoned mine quarry, Fred turned the mules toward the west. "We should bump into Custer's boys soon."

Sure enough, they were met by a federal patrol shortly after making the turn. The troopers escorted the wagon to the brigade quartermaster. Troopers unloaded the wagon.

Fred asked the quartermaster, "Can you tell us how to get to the Stringfellow Church?"

The quartermaster eyed Fred and said, "you have business there do ya? You know, Reverend Stringfellow don't take kindly to free colored folks." He looked at Roarke. "He don't care much for blue bellies either. His granddaughter married a reb officer. I think he's dead. You boys armed?"

Roarke raised the Gallagher carbine and patted the Beaumont-Adams under his shoulder.

"Not that I think you'll be needing them. He's more likely to talk you to death than shoot ya."

Thirty minutes later Fred stopped the mules in front of a white, steepled church. A tall, bespectacled man with thinning gray hair walked out of the church.

"Our mules need water," said Roarke.

"Your colored boy may draw some water at the well," said Thornton Stringfellow.

"He ain't my boy. Fred's a freeman."

"What do you really want?"

"We're looking for a Union deserter," Fred answered, "heard he's hiding in your church."

"He's not here, boy."

"Then you won't mind if my colored friend and me search the church?" asked Roarke.

"Negroes are permitted in the sanctuary, but Yankees are not, regardless of the color of their skin."

"Why is that, reverend?" asked Fred.

"Negroes are welcome because white Christians have a moral responsibility to steward our little brothers. It is God's will that white men care for the slave race."

“I don’t think that’s the Bible’s message,” Fred opined.

“My little brother, in the book of Leviticus, does not the Lord condone the holding, buying, and inheriting of slaves? Did Paul not advise an escaped slave to return to his owner? Does Christ condemn slavery anywhere in the New Testament? The answer is ‘no.’ The negro’s condition of servitude ensures that they are cared for, learn morality, and understand the way to salvation.”<sup>1</sup>

“I don’t think Jesus would approve of free labor at the end of a whip or families torn apart to make a buck,” Roarke sneered. “We’re goin’ into the church.” Roarke and Fred alighted from the wagon.

“You sah,” said Fred, “have defiled the altar of Christ by stealing freedom from God’s creations.”

Stringfellow’s thin lips twitched. He raised his right arm. A large black man stepped out of the church carrying a shotgun. Roarke looked at the black man, pursed his lips together, and shook his head. He tossed the Gallagher to Fred and drew the Beaumont-Adams. Roarke circled to the right, Fred to the left.

Fred took a step toward the black man and said, “Listen brother, we have no quarrel with you. Do you want to die for this man?”

“Nope.” The black man continued to rotate the shotgun between Fred and Roarke.

“I am a freeman. In fact, you are a freeman.” Fred placed the carbine on the ground and took a piece of paper from his pocket. “This here is the Emancipation Proclamation. President Abraham Lincoln says, ‘henceforward all slaves in Virginia shall be free.’ If you like, we will give you and your family a ride to the refugee camp in Culpeper.”

The black man set the shotgun on the porch and said, “I fetch ‘em now.”

Stringfellow looked at the black man, then he scowled at Roarke. “Will you provide for this negro and his family?”

“No,” said Roarke. They will have to make their own way.”

“They will not survive.”

“Maybe, but they will be free to choose their path,” Roarke responded, “not the path you

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<sup>1</sup> Thorton Stringfellow was a preacher, farmer, and slave owner in Culpeper, Virginia. He was well known for his Biblical defense of slavery. See Stringfellow’s 1841 essay, “A brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery,” <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/stringfellow/stringfellow.html> or <https://www.loc.gov/item/11012746/>.

or any other shoneen<sup>2</sup> picked.”

A chubby white man emerged from the church. He was wearing blue trousers and a white shirt. He picked up the shotgun.

“You O’Toole?” asked Roarke.

“That’s right. Who are you?”

“Name’s Roarke, this is Fred Seersha. We’re here to help you regarding the McKay murder. You need to return to the Army.”

O’Toole said, “Listen Roarke, I don’t give a cac about your bullshit Army or any niggas down in Mississippi. But I swear to the Mother of Jesus, I did not shoot Captain McKay.”

“We don’t think you killed him. Put down the shotgun and tell us what happened to McKay.” Roarke eyeballed Stringfellow. He was unarmed. He hadn’t moved. Roarke holstered the revolver and continued, “Tell us what happened that night.”

O’Toole leaned the shotgun against the doorframe and began, “It was dark, after taps. I was on guard duty. It was a pretty quiet night. Oh, some of the boys in the other camps were riled up but their play was harmless. Our boys were mostly in their dog tents, some in half-built cabins. There was a campfire. A handful were chatting with a camp walker. It looked like he had given the boys some whiskey, so I meandered over to the campfire to have a swallow.

“Who was the interloper?” asked Fred.

O’Toole examined Fred, shrugged his shoulders, and answered, “I don’t know. He was gone by the time I got to the campfire, so was the whiskey. So, I returned to my post. And my rifle was gone. I swear, I left it leaning against this large pine tree. Well, I quietly ran from tree to tree looking for my rifle.”

“Did you find it?” asked Roarke.

“No. I was goin’ mad. Next thing I know, I hear a rifle shot. I ran back to the campfire and see Captain McKay lying dead on the ground. Then Major Abbott shows up holding my rifle saying it had been shot recently. I’m wondering, how can that be? My gun wasn’t even loaded.”

“What?”

“Well, I never load the damn thing. I never really learned how to do it right and don’t want to kill anybody anyhow.”

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<sup>2</sup> A would-be gentleman who puts on superior airs.

“Are you saying,” Roarke asked, “that someone used your unloaded musket to shoot Captain McKay?”

“Course not, just that someone snatched my unloaded musket, loaded it, and killed the Captain.”

Roarke asked, “Where did you leave your cartridge box when you went to the campfire, the first time?”

“It was hanging over my shoulder the whole time, until the sergeant of the guard took it from me.”

Fred said, “I believe him.”

“So do I,” said Roarke. “O’Toole, you’re comin’ with us. Better to face the hangman now than after you get outta some reb prison.”

O’Toole nodded and joined the black man and his family in the back of the wagon. Fred clicked his tongue. The mules began to move. Roarke kept an eye on Reverend Stringfellow. Surprisingly, the rector was stalk-still and dumbfounded.

When the wagon was out of Stringfellow’s earshot, Roarke said, “listen O’Toole, you gotta clear your name back at headquarters. Fred and me will help you.”

“I s’pose that’s the best thing.”

A horse neighed at a distance behind the wagon.

“Rebs!” O’Toole yelled.

Roarke turned and announced, “Reb cavalry. What are they doing on this side of the river?”

“I’ve heard they occasionally send patrols across the fords to reconnoiter the Union line,” said Fred.

“Sometime dey come to da church,” said the black man.

Fred shook the reins and shouted, “hyah!” The two mules begrudgingly broke into a trot.

“They didn’t see us,” said Roarke.

Suddenly the front-right wagon wheel plunged into a pothole. Snap! The front axle split. The kingpin released, freeing the wagon tongue and the two mules. The wagon

rolled on its side.

Fred ran to the negro family and helped them to their feet. "Are you okay?" They nodded.

"I think I'm okay too," said O'Toole. "Look! On the hill, that reb is waving his arms and pointing at us."

"Where's Roarke?" asked Fred.

"I'm here, my foot is trapped 'neath the damn wagon. You go. Get the negroes and O'Toole out of here."

Fred, O'Toole, and the freed slave leaned against the wagon. It would not budge.

"Get the hell out of here! Give me the rifle. I'll hold them off best I can."

Fred looked at O'Toole. "Follow this road to Cole's Hill. This family needs you to lead them to safety."

O'Toole nodded and shouted, "Com'on. Run!"

Fred looked back to the hilltop. "There are two of them now. No, four."

Roarke grimaced, "Fred, leave. You don't wanna end up on no plantation."

Fred picked up the Gallagher carbine and said, "I'll take my chances." He pointed the carbine toward the reb troopers. Bang! Missed. The troopers urged their mounts into the woods. Fred reloaded the carbine.

"They're gonna flank us in the woods," said Roarke. He drew the Beaumont-Adams.

"I'm not waiting for that to happen. I'll be back." Fred sprinted into the woods towards the troopers.

It was quiet in the woods. The vegetation was thick. Shrubs and woody vines crowded the trees and forbid any rapid movement. Fred moved slowly. He climbed to the top of a finger pointing straight at the wagon. The vegetation was sparser. "They'll come this way." He thought.

Fred crouched behind the trunk of a fallen oak. He waited. He heard the brush stir.

"Where's that tumped-over wagon," a voice drawled.

"Yonder. Quiet," whispered a second voice.

Fred leaned against the stump and shut his eyes. He could hear the twigs trembling, or was that his fingers. He stilled his extremities. He eased his finger on to the trigger.

Snap. "Now," thought Fred. He sprung up and pointed the carbine at the butternut figure five feet in front of him. Bang! A red stain appeared center mass. The Confederate trooper fell on his back.

Fred cranked the lever forward, tilting the barrel forward. He pressed his nails into the spent paper casing. It was stuck.

Bang! A miniball bounced off the Gallagher's stock, knocking Fred to the ground. He dropped the carbine, raised himself to a knee, and gripped the knife sheathed in his boot.

Slam! The second Confederate trooper hurled his body into Fred, sending the knife flying. Fred fell onto his stomach. The trooper jumped on Fred's back, wrapped his arm around Fred's neck, and squeezed.

Fred raised himself to his hands and knees. His vision was fading. He spotted the knife. He reached for it. He collapsed under the weight of the trooper. He slithered toward the knife. He stretched his arm, his hand, his fingers toward the knife. Fred whited out.

Aieeeee! Fred shuddered and opened his eyes. The knife was buried in the trooper's thigh. The trooper clutched the knife handle. Fred stood. He stumbled. The trooper jerked the knife out of his thigh and pointed it at Fred. Fred grabbed the barrel of the carbine and swung it 180 degrees, landing the stock against the trooper's jaw. The blow lifted the trooper off the ground and dropped him on his back. Motionless.

Pu-dump, pu-dump, pu-dump. Horses galloping on the road. Bang! Bang! Pow! Fred recognized the two carbine shots followed by a pistol shot. He picked up his knife, turned toward the wagon, and ran off the finger into the bush.

As Fred approached the tree line, he saw a mounted Confederate trooper draw his saber and charge toward the wagon. Fred used the knife to pry the spent cartridge from the carbine's breech. The trooper raised his saber. Fred fumbled a new cartridge. Roarke raised the Beaumont-Adams. Pow! The steed collapsed. The trooper gracefully slid out of the saddle, landing on his feet. He ran toward Roarke. Pow! The trooper rolled to the ground, blood spurting from his neck.

The other mounted trooper had circled to Roarke's blind spot on the other side of the upended wagon. Fred pushed the cartridge into the breech, pivoted the barrel into place, and locked the lever. He squeezed the trigger. Bang! Lead whizzed by the trooper's ear. Missed, but the trooper had had enough. He whirled his mount around and galloped back up the hill.

Fred ran over to the wagon.

“Where the hell have you been? Roarke chuckled. “They almost skewered me because I’m stuck under your damn wagon.”

“Just taking care of business up there,” said Fred.

“Brother, you saved my life when you scared that other fellow off.”

Fred grabbed a water jug and sat next to Roarke. He took a swig.

“Let me have some of that,” said Roarke.

The pair rested for a few minutes. Roarke reloaded the Beaumont-Adams. Fred reloaded the Gallagher. The casing was stuck again. He used his knife to pry it out and completed the process.

“You know that I cannot budge this wagon. I must go find help. Custer’s boys shouldn’t be too far. I’ll leave Mr. Beaumont and Mr. Gallagher with you.”

A horse whinnied. Fred peeked around the wagon, “Well, I’ll be, bluecoats.”

Two columns of Federal cavalry trotted up to the wagon. At the head of the troop were a lieutenant and two troopers leading Fred’s mules.

“The cavalry to the rescue,” gallantly declared the lieutenant. “We are returning your mules.”

Roarke and Fred broke into laughter.