

JACK HINSON'S ONE-MAN WAR

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TOM C. MCKENNEY



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For all those who did the dying, and those who grieved

IN MEMORIAM

Jay Massey, "Straight Arrow," of Girdwood, Alaska; outdoorsman; freelance writer; beloved husband and father; and a young man of integrity with a nice heart who, while pursuing this story with me, was taken so suddenly from us by cancer.

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A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city.

—*Proverbs 18:19*

Preface

Concerning Quotations

Quotation sources throughout the text are as attributed, or explained in the text. Quotations at the beginning of the prologue, each chapter, and the epilogue, not otherwise attributed, are the author's, taken from the text of that portion.

Concerning the Details

This book has been researched, documented, and written as history. It has been an extremely difficult job: first, most of the events occurred more than 140 years ago; and, second, the story has been suppressed, since the war years, by the family. The story's suppression was motivated, in the beginning, by fear of the occupying Union forces' retaliation during Reconstruction. Two generations later, the time of Jack Hinson's grandchildren, some family members considered the old man's exploits to be an embarrassment since he had been, in a sense, an outlaw, a wanted man with a price on his head, a notorious killer. In that locally prominent family, he became a topic not to be discussed, and silence settled over Hinson's story.

As a result, important details, that would otherwise flesh out and enrich the account, were forever lost as many of them were literally taken to the grave. Very few of the details survived the death of Jack Hinson's grandson and namesake, John S. Hinson, in 1963.

When I began the research, almost nothing was known beyond those few words on the historical marker where I began (and part of that was in error). Even the exact location of the Hinson plantation, Bubbling Springs, was not known to the family, nor was the location of their postwar home, Magnolia Hill. The family knew the story of the execution of the Hinson sons, but no one

knew where it happened or even which two sons were killed. Nothing was known of the arrest at the time of the surrender of Fort Donelson nor the brief imprisonment of the two sons who were later executed. Nothing was known of Jack's activities during and after the battle or his acquaintance with Grant and the Confederate generals. Nothing was known of the sworn affidavit concerning the surrender of Fort Donelson, which he executed a year later. Nothing was known of Jack's taking of the loyalty oath, his citadel on Graffenreid Bluff, or his postwar status and activities. Camp Lowe, the Fort Heiman satellite and base camp for patrols sent out after Jack Hinson, was forgotten, and its location was unknown.

In the beginning of the work, little was known about Jack Hinson's nearest neighbor, not even his identity, whose plantation home was taken over and used as the Union hospital during the battle. Information on his other neighbor, whose home became Grant's headquarters for the Fort Donelson battle, was also scarce, except for the two oft-repeated words: "Widow Crisp" (and, at the time of the battle, she was not yet a widow). The historical marker, supposedly identifying the location of the Crisp home, is almost a half mile from the actual site. A passing comment by an area librarian led to interviews with a rich secondary source, the granddaughter of Mrs. Crisp's son. He had told her, many times, what he experienced in February of 1862 during the battle. Only through him, do we now know of the sensitivity, kindness, and compassion shown to Mrs. Crisp and her son by General Grant and his staff. Through him, we now also know Martha Crisp's full name, how she became "Widow Crisp," about her life and remarriage after the battle, where she is buried, and how wrong Gen. Lew Wallace's "white trash" characterization was.

Jack's special rifle was found, traced to its current owner in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and we now know its history and have a chain of possession. A nineteenth century published recollection of Nathan Bedford Forrest's adjutant, Maj. Charles W. Anderson, which told of Hinson's guiding Forrest on at least three raids, confirmed Anderson-Black-McFarlin family tradition concerning Jack's relationship with Forrest.

Most of what we now know about Jack Hinson and his family was dug out the hard way: traveling to pursue the slightest leads, asking

thousands of questions, placing newspaper ads, and searching archives. When the research began, four of Hinson's great-grandchildren were still living; they provided the few surviving family traditions, letters, photos, etc. still known to exist.

The Hinson family Bible, letters, photographs, and other records that would have answered so many questions were apparently destroyed when Federal troops burned their home at Bubbling Springs. Few records of that kind have survived, mostly those of Jack's children and grandchildren, and they provide little insight into the heart of the story—Jack's career as a self-appointed Confederate sniper.

The foundational facts of the events are known and documented, recovered in exhaustive research of the records of the National Archives, the Kentucky and Tennessee State Archives, records at Fort Donelson, collections of libraries and historical societies, nineteenth-century newspaper accounts, written reminiscences of contemporaries, and multisource family traditions. We know, for instance, about the armed Union troop transport that, under Hinson's deadly rifle fire, surrendered to that one old man; most of the details, however, are unknown. The same applies to his relationship with Grant, Pillow, Forrest, and others; the burning of the home; the incident in the Hundred Acre Field; his family's tragic exodus in a blizzard; and his citadel on the ridge above the Towhead Chute. We know that they occurred, but, in the writing, many of the details have had to be assumed. In most cases, only God really knows what was said, what people thought and felt, which way the wind was blowing, what Jack ate in the wilderness, or where the slaves stood as the house burned. In every case, the principle followed in assuming such details was this: they were chosen because, in light of the evidence that does survive, local custom, and the historical context, to choose otherwise would have been illogical—flying in the face of reason.

This is a true story, written in its historically accurate context, with its foundational facts extensively researched and authenticated, but it is a story, to the great misfortune of us all, about which many details are unknown. In some places, I fleshed out the story in order to let the reader learn not only what occurred, but also what it was like, in human terms, for the participants. In this way those who suffered and died, both Union and Confederate, soldier and civilian,

black and white, young and old, emerge from crumbling, yellowed documents, faded diaries, microfilm, statistical summaries, and footnotes, to take on flesh—to live, laugh, cry, bleed, and die.

The deaths of at least seven of the Hinson children were real. And all those Union soldiers and sailors whom Jack killed were actual boys and men, with parents, families, wives, and children, who grieved at their losses. I very much wish this fact to come to life for the readers, especially those to whom such events seem distant and academic, as impersonal as miles of railroad, tons of supplies, or electoral votes.

I believe that I have rescued a compelling historic and human story from our past, one that was nearly lost forever, and it is my hope that the laughter and the tears, the loving and the hating, the selfless nobility and the venal brutality of that war, the tearing of very human flesh, and the breaking of very human hearts, will become real to the reader.

They happened.

Tom C. McKenney
Long Beach, Mississippi

Acknowledgments

This book could not have been written without Frances Hinson, native of Magnolia, tireless, avid historian, and widow of Charles Dudley Hinson, great-grandson of Jack Hinson. She probably qualifies as coauthor but must not be held responsible for my mistakes.

My wife, Marty, an avid historian, provided ongoing research support, served as a restraint on my excessive zeal for certain aspects of the story, and put up with my extended absences. My historian daughter, Melissa Harris, provided priceless historical review and correction of the early chapters and gave me priceless help in my struggle with the computer, with time she didn't have; and my daughter Sally Mahoney and her husband, Prof. Joe Mahoney, contributed overview editing of the entire manuscript.

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the woods and climbed around on Jack's ridge with me, in places where mountain goats would fear to tread.

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The late Alvin Crutcher, Bubbling Springs neighbor, patiently provided authentic information on living and farming in that area and led us to the Hundred Acre Field. Frank Cherry, native of the Danville area, who seems to have four generations of river-land history in his head, was a generous source. The Rev. Roy West introduced me to Jack's favorite firing point on Graffenreid Bluff and sent me on the search for it. And Bart Stephenson was an enthusiastic and energetic source on the bluff, where he had made his home, and on the river and flanking creeks.

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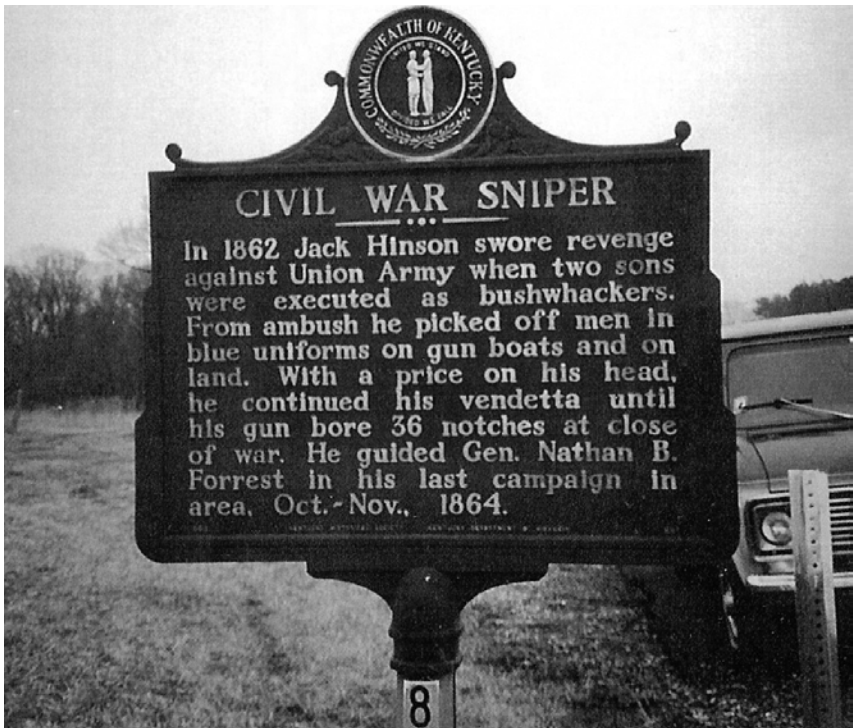
Mike Silvey, of Clarksville, Tennessee, graciously made available the Reuben R. Ross diaries. Shannon Scott, of Ocean Springs, Mississippi, with his computer graphics, made my hand-drawn maps look respectable. Jane Morrison, faithful friend, was a willing, patient e-mail terminal in Clarksville.

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And, when I was first searching, blindly, with almost no leads, librarians in area county libraries were generous with their resources and encouragement. I owe special thanks to Kay French and Jenny Rye at Erin and Greta Morton Burnett, formerly of Camden.

Introduction

In the mid 1960s, driving westward across the Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area, I was thinking about the area as it had been in earlier times. Prior to the building of the dams that created Kentucky Lake on the west and Lake Barkley on the east, flooding the low-lying portions on both sides, the land had been known simply as “Between the Rivers.” It was an inland peninsula running north and south, bound by the Tennessee River



The historical marker at Golden Pond.

on the west, the Cumberland River on the east, and the mile-wide Lower Ohio River across the north end. The place and its people were isolated; there were no bridges. In that strip of land, roughly sixty miles long from north to south and ten to fifteen miles across in most parts, there lived some exceptional people. From the time of the earliest settlers in the latter eighteenth century until they were progressively driven from their homes by the federal government in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s to depopulate the area, those people had been independent and self-reliant. They were accustomed to hard work, hardship, and deprivation, complaining to no one, expecting help from no one. They were God-fearing people, and people who feared no one but God. They had asked only to be left alone.

But those people and their homes, farms, stores, churches, and schools were gone, and as I drove, I was thinking of them. In the area where the town of Golden Pond had been, I paused to look around. Only clusters of trees, traces of stone walls, and cemeteries remained of that once vital, proud little town. As I continued westward from the site of Golden Pond, I saw a historical marker, pulled over, and stopped to read it.

The marker was engraved with the brief history of a man named Jack Hinson, whose sons had been executed by Union troops during the Federal occupation in 1862. He had set out to avenge them, becoming a sniper who terrorized the Union army for the rest of the war. Ever since that day, I have longed to know more about the man and his story, but life had taken me elsewhere.

Finally, in the early 1990s, I was able to begin to pursue the story. I went back to Golden Pond, back to that marker, noted the Kentucky archives file number, and there I started my search. Hinson's story was virtually unknown beyond those sixty-five words on the historical marker, and some of that was in error. Except for fragments, the story of Jack Hinson has never before been told. Mentioned only in one small, locally published book and an unpublished manuscript in the Tennessee State Archives, he is not even the subject of a single published chapter, appearing in histories only in brief paragraphs and footnotes.

Nothing has been written of what it was like for the Union occupation troops who pursued him. Now, however, their story is also finally told, woven through the narrative, after extensive

research of their unit records, diaries, and letters, in public archives and private collections.

The story of Hinson and his pursuers is true, but it will seem like fiction. It is the story of a responsible family man, prosperous and prominent in his community, with vast land holdings. His plantation home was at times a hospice to travelers and to prominent people. General Grant had been a guest there. Although Hinson owned a large plantation with many slaves, he opposed secession. In most ways, he was a fairly typical man of the South and of his time, but he didn't want to see the nation divided, and he opposed the war.

His attitude was also typical of the people Between the Rivers on the Kentucky-Tennessee border. Their geographical isolation was reflected in their general indifference to political matters beyond those rivers. However, as an unwelcome Civil War crowded into his life, neutrality became increasingly difficult to maintain. By the time of the battle for Fort Donelson, with some of it fought on his land, his neutrality was almost untenable. And, in the Federal occupation that followed, one tragic act of brutality overwhelmed it. The execution and mutilation of two of his sons by the occupying Union army made a deadly enemy of Jack Hinson and plunged the area more deeply into bloody conflict.

He set out to get vengeance, and this he did—spectacularly. He had a rifle specially made for long-range accuracy and began a one-man war against the Union he had previously supported. As a lone sniper, he became a deadly gadfly to the occupying army and to personnel aboard navy boats on the rivers. By the end of the war, he had probably killed more than one hundred. He operated alone, except when making history with Nathan Bedford Forrest as a guide. Elements of nine regiments, both cavalry and infantry, and an amphibious task force of specially built navy boats with a special-operations Marine brigade targeted the elderly man with a growing price on his head. They never got him.

This is the story of one man's reluctant, but savage, war with his country; vengeance; and the high price that it exacts, in not only one life or one family, but a toll that can be levied upon generations yet unborn, with open-ended tragedy.

In pursuit of the man and his story, I have traveled extensively through the area of the events, searched in county libraries, city

libraries, university libraries, private collections, the archives of historical societies, the Kentucky and Tennessee State Archives, and the National Archives. I have attended reunions Between the Rivers, sought out living sources, personal papers, and family records. I have climbed Jack Hinson's rugged hills, searched his forests, waded his swampland, and followed him through his creeks and meadows. He has proved as elusive to me as he was to the Union troops who futilely pursued him and the bounties upon his head. Now, at long last, I have found him.

This book is his story.

Prologue

Sudden Death in the Early Morning

“Before the crack of one hundred grains of black powder was heard on the boat below, a spinning, supersonic, .50-caliber projectile slammed the officer to his knees.”

As the sun rose above Jack’s bluff, climbing steadily higher through the trees, spilling its soft morning light over the bluff and down into the wide valley of the Tennessee River below, morning sounds increasingly invaded the stillness. It was a peaceful early morning between the rivers. The only sounds were those of birds greeting the daybreak, stirring forest animals, and the rising of a warming breeze in the trees.

The bluff was the steep, western end of a high, densely forested ridge. To the north, downstream toward Paducah, Kentucky, was the mouth of Leatherwood Creek; upstream to the south, and much nearer, was the mouth of Hurricane Creek. At the base of the bluff, in the wide river bottom, there were green cornfields and a grove of chestnut trees. A dirt road ran along the river, paralleled by a narrow-gauge railroad. Across the river, near the Benton County shore, was Hurricane Island. On the near side of the river, a short distance offshore, was a smaller island called the Towhead. The islands were landmarks on the Tennessee River, covered with cottonwood, brown birch, maple, and sycamore and fringed with willow and cane, the native bamboo used by the locals for fishing, beanpoles, and pipe stems. The river channel ran close in there, between the near bank and the Towhead, and the narrow passage was called the Towhead Chute.

The chute was a choke point in the river route from Grant’s supply depots at Cairo and Paducah to his invading armies in the field to the south and east. All large boats were forced to pass through that narrow channel in order to avoid running aground. Thus, Grant’s gunboats, supply boats, and transports were forced

to pass nakedly below the gaze of that high bluff, making them predictable and very vulnerable to attack from the shore. That wasn't the only problem. There, in the chute, much of the power of the mighty Tennessee River was concentrated, squeezed through the narrow passage with great force. Northbound boats rushed through the chute at breathtaking speeds, but southbound boats, at full power, could barely make headway against the surging mill-race current that rushed northward. The boats headed south were nearly stationary targets, sitting ducks, in that deadly gauntlet for upwards of an hour. And there was no avoiding it.

From a rock ledge about twenty feet below the crest of the bluff, high above the rushing current of the Towhead Chute, Jack Hinson sat and watched. Downstream, a steamboat was making its way southward from Paducah against the current, visible only in its black smoke, rising above the bluffs in dark, smudgy brushstrokes, against the pale morning sky. Silently and patiently, he watched its progress. There was plenty of time, and it was entirely predictable. He knew that it would continue on its southbound course and would soon pass below him. There was no reason to wonder where on the wide river the boat would pass, for he knew the location of the channel; and there was no reason for anxiety about missing his chance, for he knew that the current in the chute would give him plenty of time. He smoked his pipe contentedly and waited as the big boat appeared and approached at full speed. It was a Union gunboat.

With his heavy rifle barrel resting on a low limb of a small oak, he cocked the hammer, put a cap on the nipple, eased the hammer back down on the nipple, and waited. It was going to be a fine day—pleasant, easy weather, and another opportunity for a kill. Maybe more than one.

Hinson was fifty-seven. By the standards of the day, he was an old man, but he was tough, strong, and agile, and his vision was as keen as his all-business, methodical mind. Some called him "Old Jack." Others, lately, had begun to refer to him as "Captain Jack." Like most Between the Rivers men, he was completely at home in the forested hills and in the cane breaks, cypress bays, and willow thickets of the river and creek bottoms. So this morning he waited, patiently and comfortably, high up on his bluff, watching as the gunboat approached the chute and slowed suddenly as

it was struck by the surging current. The gunboat would be in the chute at least forty-five minutes, maybe an hour, a nearly stationary target.

As he looked over the barrel of his rifle, with its growing number of tiny, eighth-of-an-inch circles, each the record of a confirmed kill, he patiently scanned the exposed men on the boat, looking for the epaulet of an officer. Seeing a blue-clad officer leaning on the forward port side rail, smoking his pipe, Jack looked no farther. As his attention closed down on that one man, like the zoom lens of a camera, he no longer saw the others. For that brief moment, Jack and the Yankee officer were alone—the only two people on earth. He pressed his cheek against the curly maple stock of his custom-made, .50-caliber, Kentucky rifle. Looking over the rear sight, he aligned the front sight blade in the rear sight's "V" and, holding his sight picture, moved the rifle until the bright German silver bead of the front sight blade was at the point where the Union officer's neck met his chest. He moved the bead lower, down to the fourth shiny brass button on the blue uniform coat, then eased the bead a little lower still, to allow for the downhill shot. Downhill shots tend to go high, and the six-hundred-yard range was too great to try for a head shot.

Jack cocked the hammer deliberately, one click to half cock, then the second click to full cock.

Unaware that the next few seconds would be his last on earth, the lieutenant puffed contentedly on his pipe and enjoyed the scenery where, just ahead, Hurricane Creek was flowing into the Tennessee River. It was a fine and gentle morning on the river, its watery fragrance was filling the air, and the lieutenant's pipe was the perfect postscript to an excellent breakfast. High above him and unseen, Old Jack held his sight picture tight, his gray eyes as cool as the steel of his rifle barrel, waiting for the breeze to subside. As the gunboat struggled at full power to make headway, the wind fell to a whisper. Jack cocked the set trigger, felt the soft click as it prepared the rear trigger to fire, and tightened his grip on the stock. He took a deep, easy breath, exhaled, then took another deep, easy breath, let half of it out, and held it. After one final check of his sight picture, he touched the trigger.

Before the crack of one hundred grains of exploding black powder reached the boat below, a spinning, supersonic, .50-caliber

projectile slammed the officer to his knees as his pipe slipped from unfeeling fingers and fell onto the scrubbed deck in a shower of sparks. He fell slowly over on his back, with his legs awkwardly under him, and rolled gradually onto his side, blood erupting from his chest and flowing more slowly from the exit wound in his lower back. His eyes looked straight ahead, seeing nothing; his face was a grayish mixture of surprise and puzzlement. Without a word, or even a groan, massive bleeding and shock snuffed out the candle of his life. Suddenly he more resembled a crumpled, discarded pile of bloody clothing than the proud naval officer he had been only three seconds before. He didn't move, except for some twitching in his legs. He was dead—another statistic in the grim bookkeeping of that terrible war.

As the sound of the shot reached the boat, the sailors above deck dived for cover, looking in vain confusion for the source of the danger. All they saw was the green sameness of the river bottom and the steep hill rising above it. High up, some of them thought they saw a small cloud of white smoke dissipating in the warming air. Deck guns fired uselessly at the base of the bluff, and sailors fired rifles, impotently, into the cornfield and various places on the bluff beyond.

No fire was returned, and again the only sounds were those of the boat's throbbing engines, its thrashing paddles, the rushing water, and the breeze. As Jack watched, motionless, from above, the surgeon and his orderlies moved quickly to the crumpled remains of the downed officer. He could easily have killed one or two of them, but that was not his way. In his personal protocols for such matters, medical men going to the aid of a downed comrade were off-limits and not to be harmed. All other soldiers and sailors, however, were fair game. Officers were preferred.

He watched as the boat continued its uninterrupted struggle up the chute, finally passing the south end of the Towhead and steering to starboard with the channel, away from the peril of that rushing gauntlet and out into the relative safety of midriver.

As the sun rose ever higher above the bluff and the morning gently warmed, Jack cleaned and reloaded his rifle. Seeing no more boats or smoke downstream and hearing no whistles from that direction, he shouldered his shot bag, picked up his rifle, and, using his free hand to pull himself from tree to tree, climbed to the

top of the bluff. He took one more look at the boat as it steamed on toward Danville Crossing, then turned and disappeared into the forest.

Aboard the gunboat, as it picked up speed against the slower current in midstream, the surgeon prepared the lieutenant's body for burial, and bluejackets cleaned the bloody deck and rail. On the quarterdeck, the gunboat's captain began to compose in his mind the condolence letter he would have to write to his lieutenant's family. He was thinking of what a good man the lieutenant had been and was still trying to adjust to the sickening reality of his death. He was also thinking that war is a hellish, nasty business.

Jack Hinson would have agreed had he and the captain been able to discuss the matter. He had been, until recently, a man of peace and one of the leading citizens of Stewart County, Tennessee. His large farm, Bubbling Springs, had been a prosperous, productive plantation and home to his family and a large number of slaves—a place of plenty, happiness, and tranquility. Although surrounded with secessionist friends and family, he had opposed secession and the war. When war had come, he had wanted no part of it; at the time of the Fort Donelson battle, he had been uniquely neutral, a friendly acquaintance of both General Grant and the Confederate commanders. After the battle, Grant had been a guest in his home.

But that was then.

Now he was a deadly enemy, feared and hated by the Union soldiers and sailors who had to pass through his area, and a notorious, most-wanted fugitive hunted by Grant's army and navy, with a growing reward offered for anyone who could kill him.

What had transformed this prominent, prosperous peacemaker into a deadly enemy of his own government, a homeless, shadowy terror of the forest, visiting sudden death upon all in Union blue who had the bad fortune to appear in his sights? What had brought about such tragic transformation? What could have created such a nightmare?