

*“Join the army and fight for glory across the globe,” they had said. “Join the army and spend your life digging in the mud in all the rain-sodden holes of every godforsaken corner of the world,” was not how things had been described. Yet here he was, knee-deep in mud, shovel in hand, in some American wilderness. Digging.*

*To be fair, the Ohio valley was beautiful, and the location of their makeshift fort, “Necessity”, offered spectacular views. The trouble was you couldn’t see the bloody view for the rain. He might as well have been back home in Lancashire. The views were just as good when the rain broke, and at least there you didn’t have to deal with this damned Virginian summer heat.*

*They’d been marching all day, uphill for most of it, in stifling heat. When they finally reached the rendezvous, they encountered the most pathetic looking fort Harry Cook had ever seen. He’d marched up from Virginia under Captain Mackay to reinforce Colonel Washington’s Virginians. They set up camp outside the fort, the Captain not wanting them to mix with “that drunken rabble of a militia,” and no sooner had they set up camp than the muck started to fly. A scout returned. The French had been sighted less than a day’s march away. That’s when the digging had started. And the rain.*

*A cry passed down the trench, and Harry looked up and peered through the rain. Figures were emerging from the darkness. Around him, men scrambled for their weapons. He leapt from the trench and grabbed his musket, and began to load it, taking care to keep the rain away from the powder charge. Around him others were firing already. The number of dull clunks between the gunpowder cracks suggesting that others had not taken the same degree of care.*

*Calmly, Harry raised his musket and took careful aim. He was one of the best shots in the regiment and knew that nothing put fear into the enemy like seeing their comrades head split open from a precisely aimed musket ball. Gently, he pulled the trigger. The muzzle flashed with a crack and that glorious smell of powder smoke filled his nostrils.*

*But his target didn’t fall. He looked on incredulously for a moment. It’s a shot he’d taken many times before. More shots cracked around him, but not one of the enemy seemed to fall. He wiped the rainwater from his eyes. Could it just be visibility? Surely even an errant musket ball must have hit. His ears pricked up – there was an unusual sound in the battle, a metallic clanging coming from across the battlefield. Were the Frenchmen wearing some new type of armour that could deflect musket fire?*

*“Fall back to the stockade!” The command interrupted his reverie just as he was bringing his gun up for a second shot. He sent a snapshot off in the general direction of the enemy before turning and running back towards Fort Necessity.*


*He was through the gates in less than a minute, panting as he took up a post on the battlement.*

*“Corporal Cook!” a voice shouted. The Captain’s voice, Harry recognised.*

*“Aye, sir!” Harry called back, waving so that the captain could see his position. Mackay signalled to the Virginians’ quartermaster who jogged over to Harry, handing him an unusual musket.*

*“Newtonium sprung helix-action,” the quartermaster explained, indicating the unusual mechanical contraption around the firing pan. “Greatly increases the range and accuracy. Load the barrel as normal but give it a double charge – the barrel’s tough*





enough to take it. Then wind the key three full turns, and then engage with this lever. When you pull the trigger the clockwork mechanism will release momentarily before the flint strikes the pan. It spins the ball back down into the charge creating extra pressure on the charge, and the spin itself carries the ball further and straighter when fired.”

Harry took hold of the gun and tested it for weight. It was heavy, but well balanced – a marksman’s weapon. Thanking the quartermaster with a nod, he turned back towards his post.

“Colonel Washington told me to give it to the best shot in my unit.” Mackay had made his way over. “You are to take your shots carefully, look for their officers and take them down. Sow disorder amongst their ranks, corporal.”

“Aye, sir.” Harry turned and ran to his position on the wall. He settled in behind the gun and began to scan the battlefield for officers. A calm came over him and his vision seemed to clear, almost as if the rain thinned. So focused on his search for the enemy leaders he, however, that he almost missed the shocking truth about the enemy soldiery as they marched clanking and ticking towards them. There were gasps from around him, curses and prayers as his comrades saw it too. The army approaching was not one of men.

Hulking brass automata marched towards them in perfect unison. There were hundreds of them, each towering over a mortal man, with arms ending in blades. An infernal ticking of their clockwork motors echoing across the battlefield. Steeling themselves against the threat, Harry’s comrades opened fire with a volley of musket fire that would have halted the march of ordinary soldiers in their path. But the mechanical monstrosi-

ties marched on, lead pinging off their brass plated torsos.

Then, suddenly, the mechanical men came to a halt. The centre of their line separated slightly, and an officer rode forward, a flag of parley held aloft. Harry kept his aim on the officer, in case of treachery, as the gates to Fort Necessity opened, and Colonel George Washington and his small entourage rode out to meet with the French commander.

Four men left the stockade: Washington, Mackay, Washington’s interpreter – a Dutchman, Jacob van Braam – and, surprisingly, Washington’s physician, William Hunter. Harry hushed those around him and strained to hear the parley.

“Captain Coulon wishes to inform you that his has three hundred of his clockwork soldiers ready to storm the stockade. He claims their armour is impervious to musket fire and that we will not be able to defeat them.” Van Braam relayed the French captain’s demands. “He demands you surrender forthwith and has drawn up this document for your signatures.” Coulon offered the document to Washington.

Washington’s eyes swept across the regiment of brass in front of him, before turning, but not to Mackay as his fellow military officer, but to Hunter and van Braam. A silent message seemed to pass between them before Washington spoke.

“You may think your automata invulnerable, sir, but behind me is the steel and determination of the British Army. We do not fear you.” Van Braam translated, and when finished Washington and his companions turned their horses headed back to Fort Necessity.

Harry was certain he saw the Frenchman sneer as he abruptly folded the accords of surrender and turned back



to his own lines. Harry kept his aim on the captain until the clockwork soldiers reformed their ranks as he passed through. Washington's group was still halfway back to the stockade when one of the automata jerked suddenly to life and sprang towards the colonel. Cries rang out from the wall, and the four men slowly turned to see what faced them, but they reacted too slowly. Harry knew only he could make the difference.

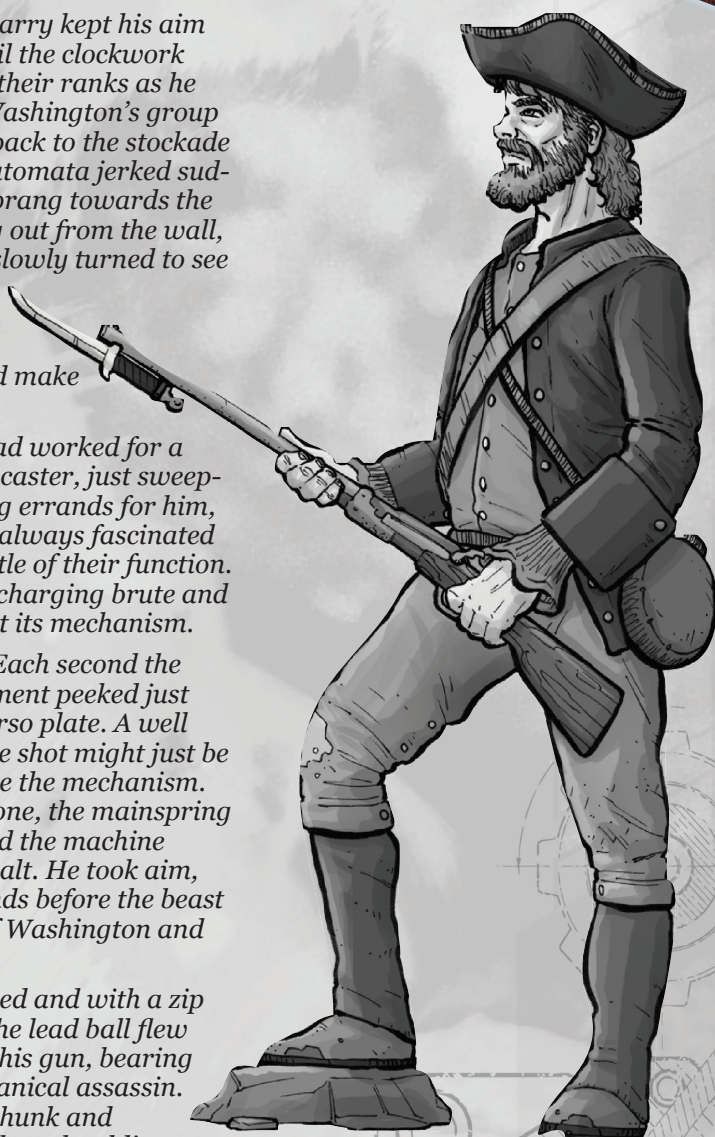
As a boy, Harry had worked for a clockmaker in Lancaster, just sweeping up and running errands for him, but the clocks had always fascinated him. He knew a little of their function. He focused on the charging brute and looked for a shot at its mechanism.

There! He saw it. Each second the arm of the escapement peeked just above the brass torso plate. A well timed and accurate shot might just be enough to sabotage the mechanism. The escapement gone, the mainspring would unravel, and the machine would grind to a halt. He took aim, but only had seconds before the beast would be on top of Washington and his party.

The trigger squeezed and with a zip and a loud crack the lead ball flew from the barrel of his gun, bearing down on the mechanical assassin. Then there was a thunk and a boing as the clockwork soldier stalled and then stood, immobile, its blade an inch from Washington's skull.

A cheer went up from the men on the wall. Washington turned with a face of fury to face the honourless French. And then chaos erupted.


The mechanical soldiers, en masse, began to charge the stockade. "Aim for gap at the top of the breastplate!" Harry yelled to his companions, although he knew they were doomed.



His weapon reloaded; Harry took another aim. Zip, crack, another clockwork soldier ground to a halt. One more down, but the soldiers marched on. There was just too many of them.

As he reloaded, Harry registered that the colonel had made it through the gates, but his attention was drawn to the members of the party who remained outside. The surgeon, Hunter, and the interpreter, Van



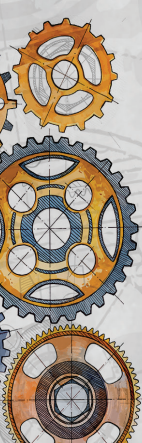


*Braam, stood their ground in front of the stockade, awaiting the oncoming horde. Van Braam drew his sword and set himself for the charge, coat tails flapping in the breeze, but Hunter merely flexed his arms, fingers splayed.*

*Suddenly the earth shook, and the wind picked up to a gale. Great juts of earth spurred up from the ground knocking the mechanical men aside and blocking their path to the walls. In a single bound, as if carried by the wind, Van Braam leapt across the battlefield, blade flashing in a blur as he landed between four or the automata. All four suddenly fell apart, arms, legs, torso plates and heads rolling to the floor.*

*Not to be outdone by his Dutch companion, Hunter ran at the nearest machine and reached beneath its plates, pulling out a handful of cogs and rendering another immobile.*

*“Doctor!” Harry called out. Another clockwork man had turned to attack him from behind. Harry’s call had come too late as the great metallic blade came slashing down. Harry grimaced in anticipation of Hunter’s bloody end, but it never came. There was the dull sound of metal against rock. The blade stopped at Hunter’s shoulder. The doctor didn’t even flinch, he just turned around and ripped another handful of machinery out from its throat. Another one down. Perhaps they could win this after all.*



*His gun loaded, Harry searched for another target, again looking for officers. Peering through the gloom he noticed a Frenchman at the back, stood on the back of a cart. The man was wearing a strange suit that encapsulated his body. Then Harry noticed, as he moved, so did the automata. They were mirroring the Frenchman’s actions. Harry had his target.*

*He took a careful aim, taking his time to make sure the shot would count. The distance was great. He hoped this new gun was as good as the quartermaster had said. He drew a bead on the Frenchman, aiming for his heart – one-shot kill. His aim was steady, and he eased his grip on the trigger.*

*Suddenly the wall splintered beneath him and he fell from the barricade. The wind knocked out of him as he smacked into the muddy floor. A hulking shape stepped through the shattered stockade wall and loomed over him.*

*Turning, Harry scrambled to reach his weapon. A sudden pain erupted from his abdomen as he looked down to see a brass blade protruding from just below his ribs. Then the blade was gone, and blood started to flow from the wound. Rolling over in agony, Harry saw the automata move on to its next victim, leaving him for dead.*

*His head spinning with pain and blood loss, Harry surveyed the scene. Through the wall he could see Hunter and Van Braam slicing and pummeling their way through the ranks of automata, but a handful of the machines had breached the wall and were proceeding to slaughter the defenders, Harry’s comrades in arms. A determination flooded him, as he turned to face the enemy. He had a target; he knew what he had to do.*

*Rolling on to his belly and bracing his musket against his shoulder he caught sight of the officer controlling the machines and took his aim, blinking heavily as his life force left him. Forcing whatever will he could muster, he squeezed the trigger.*

*And then the blackness took him.*