

CAN YONS

It is more than 100 years ago. A 14-year-old Apache boy named Coyote Runs has been chosen to go on his first raid to steal Mexican horses. In his tribe, to go on a raid means to be accepted as a man.

The raids are dangerous. The Apaches, who live in New Mexico, must ride for three days, then cross the Rio Grande into Mexico. There, they must face Mexicans who have guns. The Apaches must also avoid "bluebellies," U.S. Cavalry.

BY GARY PAULSEN

This passage begins when the Apaches are returning from the raid. Coyote Runs rides next to his friend Magpie. They have been riding all night and are tied to their horses to keep from falling off.

In the thick clouds of dust rising in the morning air it was impossible to tell what was happening but he could hear the fire and knew whoever was shooting had large guns. The sounds were low, thudding, and the Mexican riders would not have such guns. Only the bluebellies, the pony soldiers, would make such a noise with their large rifles.

He hesitated for a moment, confused, and in that time Magpie—who had been on his left—came galloping out of the dust.

"Run! Soldiers — run, my friend, they are too many. They are amongst us. Head for the canyons. Run now!"

And he was gone, off to the right in the dust, invisible.

Still Coyote Runs held back. He was reluctant to lose the horses so easily. What would the men say if he just ran and proved to be nothing? Besides, his medicine was strong. Had not the Mexicans shot at him and missed?

But in half a second another figure came out of the dust, then two, and he saw that they were holding the loud rifles and were aiming at

him and he turned and dug his heels into the straw-colored horse.

It broke into a run as if waiting for the command, lunged so hard Coyote Runs would have fallen off had he not been tied on. And the lunge saved his life, as he fell backward a soldier rode beside him and held out his rifle and fired, not ten feet away, but the bullet passed where Coyote Runs had been sitting and missed him.

Now run, he thought. Now little horse, run for all there is, run for my medicine, my life, my soul. Run like the wings of birds. Fly—run!flyrun!fly.

The straw-colored horse laid its ears back and streamed its tail and streaked through the sand dunes and mesquite so fast that the soldiers could not possibly have followed him, would have lost him in the thick clouds of dust.

He was turning straight toward the bluffs and high canyons up from the desert. Ahead of him not two hundred paces he saw Magpie driving his horse, whipping it, and when he turned to look back he saw four soldiers break out of the dust, chasing them. Three hundred paces, no more, separated him from the four men. They all had large rifles. One of them had been the one to shoot at him.

Four, he thought — so much noise from four men?

But there were more. Off to one side, looking to the north, he saw

the main body of Apaches were being chased toward the next canyon over by more soldiers.

Firing. Everybody was firing. The soldiers were trying to shoot while they rode. It was hard to see how they could hit anything, but Coyote Runs heard those behind him fire — the rifles making a dull thud — and then heard the whistle of the bullet passing close to him.

The canyon. How far? His medicine. The canyon they were heading for was the one leading to his medicine place. If he could make that, could get to the ancient ones, surely he would be safe. . . .

More firing, the bullets hissing past. He turned to look back once more and saw that soldiers had fallen slightly back. They were all big men, heavy, and their mounts were not as fresh. It must have been the group of soldiers they saw on the way down — out on patrol. They must have run into them. He saw sweat on the sides of their horses, foam from their mouths. His own horse was the same, wet, but still driving well, its shoulders pumping with great strength.

Four bowshots left to the canyon mouth.

There he would have to leave the horse and run up the sides on foot. If he got into the rocks they would never catch him. Not the big sweaty men in the heavy blue clothes — he would be free.

Again they fired. Again the small whistles, the little chu-chu-

chu of death.

Ahead of him Magpie suddenly jerked erect on his horse and a red spray went out from his chest. He threw up his arms almost as if he were waving both his hands. He began to fall forward, then fell back and to the side and was dragged by the rope around his waist. His horse tried to keep running without stepping on him but could not and veered off into a circle fighting away from the body.

The body.

Magpie was a body.

He must untie the rope holding him to the straw-colored horse. He fumbled with the knot, jerked, finally pulled it free. Only twenty good leaps to the canyon mouth, to the trail, to safety, to life.

Magpie was a body.

He slammed his heels into the horse, asking for more, still more speed. Behind him there was more gunfire. The bluebellies reloaded as they rode, shot again and again and still the bullets missed.

Ten leaps.

Now five.

Coyote Runs felt a slap on his leg and the horse grunted beneath him and began to go down. They had hit the straw-colored horse. But when he looked down to the side he saw his foot hanging loosely, blood coming from just above the ankle.

They had hit him and the bullet had gone into the horse. His medicine had failed — how could that be? He was so sure of it. . . .

The horse collapsed, its legs getting softer and softer as it caved in and just hit the ground. Coyote

Runs fell off to the right and rolled on his shoulder. His bow, all his arrows were gone. He had no way to fight but it didn't matter now.

H

e was in the canyon.

His medicine place — he had to reach it. It was all he could think now, pulling himself along, and he scabbled on his one good leg and his hands up a narrow trail, kept going though the pain came now in waves, covered him in red waves, kept pulling and fighting until he was in a grassy area.

They would not come, he thought. The soldiers would not come after him up in the canyon. He would keep going but they would not come for him. They would turn away.

He was wrong.

He heard them yelling in back of him, yelling to each other as they started up the trail after him. Their voices echoed from the canyon walls. They did not sound like men, the voices, but like devil voices, death voices, ghost voices.

He shook his head. The craziness from the wound was coming into his head and he shook it to clear it, to stop the weakness.

He fought forward on his good leg and hands, crawling and hobbling across the grassy area, the dry grass crumbling beneath him, the morning sun warm on his back.

Everything bright, everything very clear and bright and hot and fresh. The air smelled good, even through the pain; smelled sweet

and good.

I will do this thing, he thought, his head momentarily clear. I will get away from the bluebellies and to the place of the sacred ones and back to my mother and ask the question of medicine, ask what I do not know.

The soldiers' voices grew fainter.

I am doing this — I am making it away from them. O spirits, dust spirits, and wind spirits and ghost spirits, help me, come now to help me.

T

hey were in the streambed of the canyon, down and to his right, between him and the place of the ancient ones. They blocked him. He would have to hide. He would have to find a place and hide from them and let them search until he could get around them and while thinking of it, while wondering where he could hide, his eyes caught the dark place beneath an overhanging boulder looking down on the spring.

All at the same time he saw the spring and the boulder and the dark place and knew what he had to do. His body, his whole being wanted to get to the water at the spring. He had never been so thirsty. But that was where the soldiers would look. They would seek him there.

Instead he must hide beneath the boulder. Cover himself with dirt and hide there and let the spirits take the soldiers the wrong way.

He worked in beneath the boulder, back in the crack where it met the earth, and carefully covered himself with sand and dust so that he would not show and thought still that he would do this, could do this thing.

And now they came.

Three of them. They must have left one to stay with the horses. Three of the soldiers came and he smelled them before he saw them. They smelled of strange sweat and some smell that came from the wool in their clothing and tobacco and hair on their faces — some mixed smell of all that together.

White smell.

Bluebelly smell.

Pony soldier smell.

Death smell.



Then he saw them. All three were walking side by side, about ten yards apart, staring intently at the spring, the small cottonwoods, the big rifles held in front of them, ready.

Ready for him. Ready to shoot him.

They were so close now, so close that he could see that one of them had a small cut on his cheek and that the blood had dried black. The man was large, squinting in the sun, and in the same sun, in the new morning light Coyote Runs saw his end, his death.

As he watched the soldiers begin to pass, his eyes fell on the ground in front of them and there it was, his betrayal.

His ankle had left a small trail of blood, smears here and there on the rocks and in the dirt. He had not thought of that. Had not considered that he would leave blood.

Still he had a moment of hope. They were almost past the small blood trail and he thought, oh, yes, I will live yet, I will not die in this place. I will live, I will live, I will live. . . .

Then the bluebelly saw it.

The soldier on the right stopped suddenly and looked down and Coyote Runs thought, no, not now, hide me medicine but knew, knew it was too late.

The soldier's eyes followed the scuffs and patches of blood up and to the right, up and up the eye came until he was looking at the rock.

Take me now, spirit, Coyote Runs thought — take me up and away now, away and away from this place. Take me.

They saw him.

But they did not shoot.

They walked up to where he lay beneath the overhang of the rock, stood there, strong and tall and ugly and blue and stinking of white sweat, they stood there and looked down on him.

Coyote Runs did not move, lay looking up at them, sought his spirit, sought his soul. Away now, take me away from this place, spirit. . . .

The man who had first seen him said something again, not to Coyote Runs but to the other two men, and they all laughed. Words Coyote Runs did not understand, but the laughter he knew. It was hard laughter.

The soldier said something to him.

It was some kind of order, but he could not understand it. Some strong word. Maybe he swore.

Coyote Runs looked at him, shook his head. I do not know what you mean.

Then the soldier leaned down, still smiling, and put the muzzle of his rifle against Coyote Runs' forehead and he thought, no, not now, I will go with you, I am in the wrong place, take me, spirit, take me now quickly before, before, before. . . .

There was an enormous white flash, a splattering flash of white and the start of some mad noise to end all noises and then there was nothing.

Nothingness.