

Words from the Author

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Andrea Warren

Because my adopted daughter was orphaned during the Vietnam War, I have paid careful attention to the subject of children and war. Two of my nonfiction books for young readers, *Surviving Hitler: A Boy in the Nazi Death Camps*, and *Escape From Saigon: How a Vietnam War Orphan Became an American Boy*, have already explored aspects of this subject. My new book, *Under Siege! Three Children at the Civil War Battle for Vicksburg*, looks at it from another perspective—that of children directly in the theatre of war. And this time the story is set on American soil.

My goal in this writing, *Under Siege!*, as in my others, was to create a *you-are-there* approach that draws in young readers by exploring history through the experiences of children. Ten-year-old Lucy McRae is the daughter of a well-to-do Vicksburg merchant; and eleven-year-old Willie Lord is the son of the Episcopalian minister who is a Northerner but sympathizes with the South. My third character allows readers to view the action from a Northern perspective, for Frederick Grant is the twelve-year-old son of the besieging general, Ulysses S. Grant. Through these three children and a host of supporting characters that includes townspeople, soldiers, and generals, readers learn first-hand about war.

At the start of the war, Vicksburg, Mississippi, was a small city of five thousand people, which included one thousand children, built on the hills and bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River. Gun batteries along the waterfront and high atop the bluffs prevented Federal ships from using the river. The North needed that great water highway to win the war, for control would not only split the Confederacy in half, but would give the North a pathway to invade the Deep South. "Vicksburg is the key," Abraham Lincoln stated, and he sent Grant to silence the guns.

After five battles against the Confederate forces defending the city, Grant decided to take it by siege. Confederates ringed three sides of the city—the river formed the fourth side. Grant's troops lined up opposite the Rebels, and Yankee ironclads fortified the river, staying just out of reach of the Vicksburg guns. Day and night for forty-seven days, Northern canon on land and water pounded the besieged city with shells. Inside Vicksburg, terrorized citizens took shelter in caves and worried as food and drinkable water supplies dwindled. Finally, on July 4, 1863, the Confederates surrendered because they were too weak from starvation to resist any longer. Remarkably, the caves kept most people safe,

and fewer than a dozen civilians were killed by shells, though many died later because of the extreme deprivations they suffered during the siege.

The first time Federal gunboats attacked Vicksburg, Willie Lord viewed what was happening as high adventure, then quickly realized that he and his family were in real danger and must move into a cave. Townspeople did their best to make the caves inhabitable, but they were hot, damp, and home to scorpions, snakes, flies, and mosquitoes. It was “living like tree roots,” according to one cave dweller.

The Lord family’s first cave home was large and communal. Lucy’s family lived in this same cave. Willie’s father helped save her life when she was buried alive after a section of the roof collapsed. Lucy had other close calls, for she was nearly killed by an exploding shell, and once she had to run for her life when she got too close to enemy fire. Willie and his family also had near disasters. One shell actually landed in the middle of their dinner table and left a large crater in the floor. Both Lucy and Willie suffered from hunger and feared that soon there would be nothing at all to eat.

Frederick Grant, on the other hand, always had plenty to eat. But Frederick disobeyed his father’s orders to stay in camp, and he put himself in the middle of the fighting, witnessing firsthand the horrors of the battlefield. He suffered a gunshot wound to the leg, and while he did not have to have it amputated, he contracted several camp illnesses, including dysentery and typhoid fever. To top it off, he was nearly kidnapped by the enemy.

I am fortunate that Lucy, Willie, and Frederick left behind reminiscences that not only told their stories, but gave me insight into their reactions and feelings. What children today experience in war may be different from the three in my book, but the terror, the danger, and the deprivation have not changed. I feel strongly that our global society pays too little attention to the impact of war on children. How many of us realize that in the 1990s, an estimated two million children died in wars around the globe? Our current decade may surpass that.

And how well known is it that children were targets in our own Civil War? I hope that readers of *Under Siege!* will never again think of children caught up in war as something that happens somewhere else. To win, the much-admired Grant, a devoted husband and the father of four young children, gave the order to siege and shell Vicksburg to try to knock out the guns and to hasten surrender. While the city was defended by thirty thousand Confederate soldiers, he knew that thousands of elderly people, women, and children lived there.

I can only hope that the story of Vicksburg gives readers pause and causes them to question what happens to civilians—particularly to children—in wartime. If it does, I will have accomplished an important personal goal.

About the Author

Andrea Warren's nonfiction for young readers has received several prestigious honors, including the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for *Orphan Train Rider: One Boy's True Story* and the Sibert Honor Book Award for *Surviving Hitler: A Boy in the Nazi Death Camps*. She lives in the Kansas City area and can be contacted through her Web site, AndreaWarren.com, which also contains extensive information about all her books.