

Uncle Sam: A Horse's Tale

by Curt Iles
Illustrated by Jade Ross



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Written by Curt Iles
Illustrated by Jade Ross
Design editor: Julian Quebedeaux

Visit www.creekbank.net to learn more about the writing and speaking ministry of Curt Iles. You can also contact us at Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

Creekbank Stories exists to entertain, educate, and encouragement through wholesome stories celebrating the culture and history of Louisiana's Piney Woods.

For my grandchildren Noah, Jack, Jude, Sydney, and Luke.

- C.I.

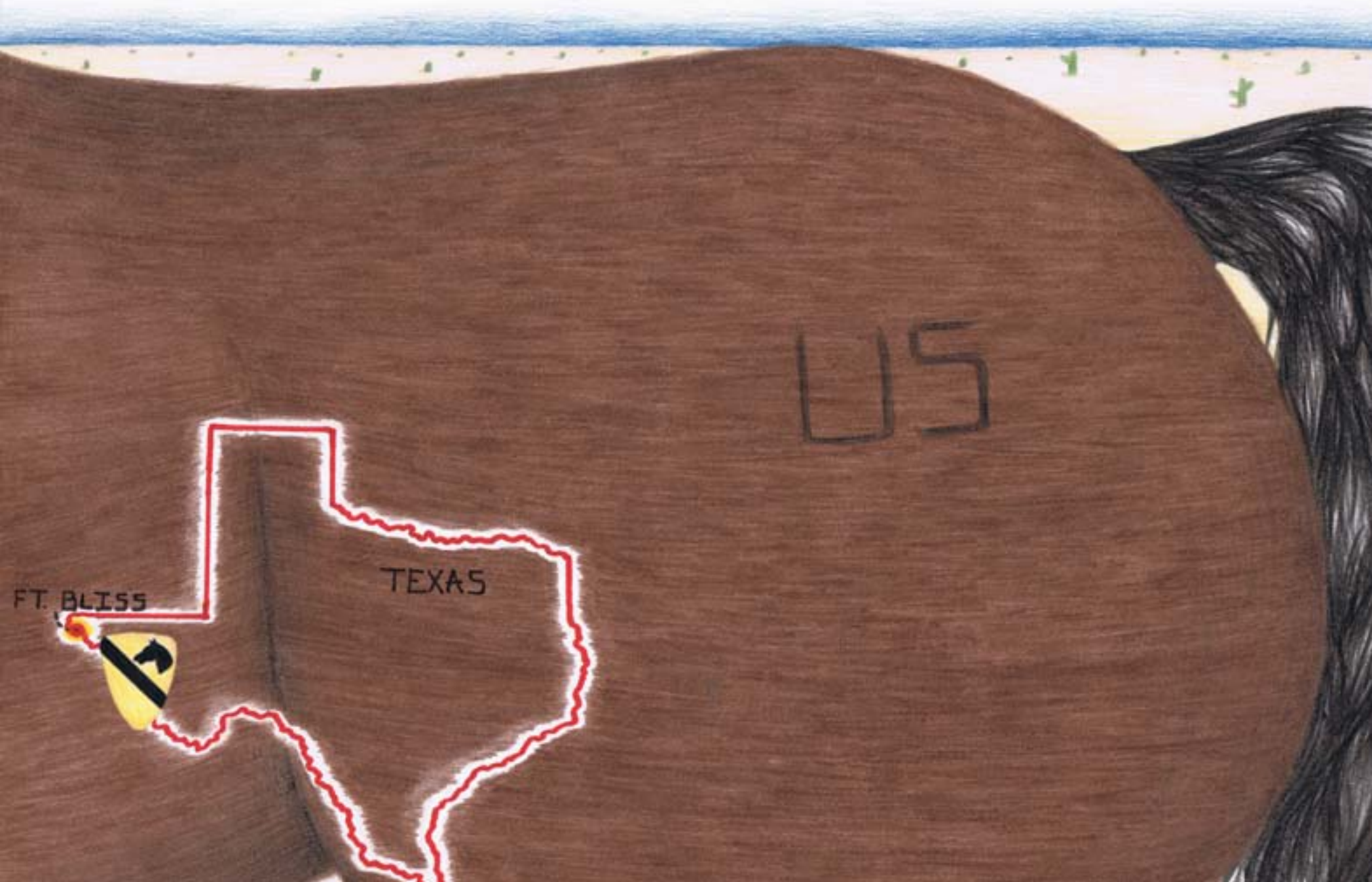
For Alexis.

- J.R.

This is the story of a fine horse named Sam and how he came to live in the piney woods of Louisiana.

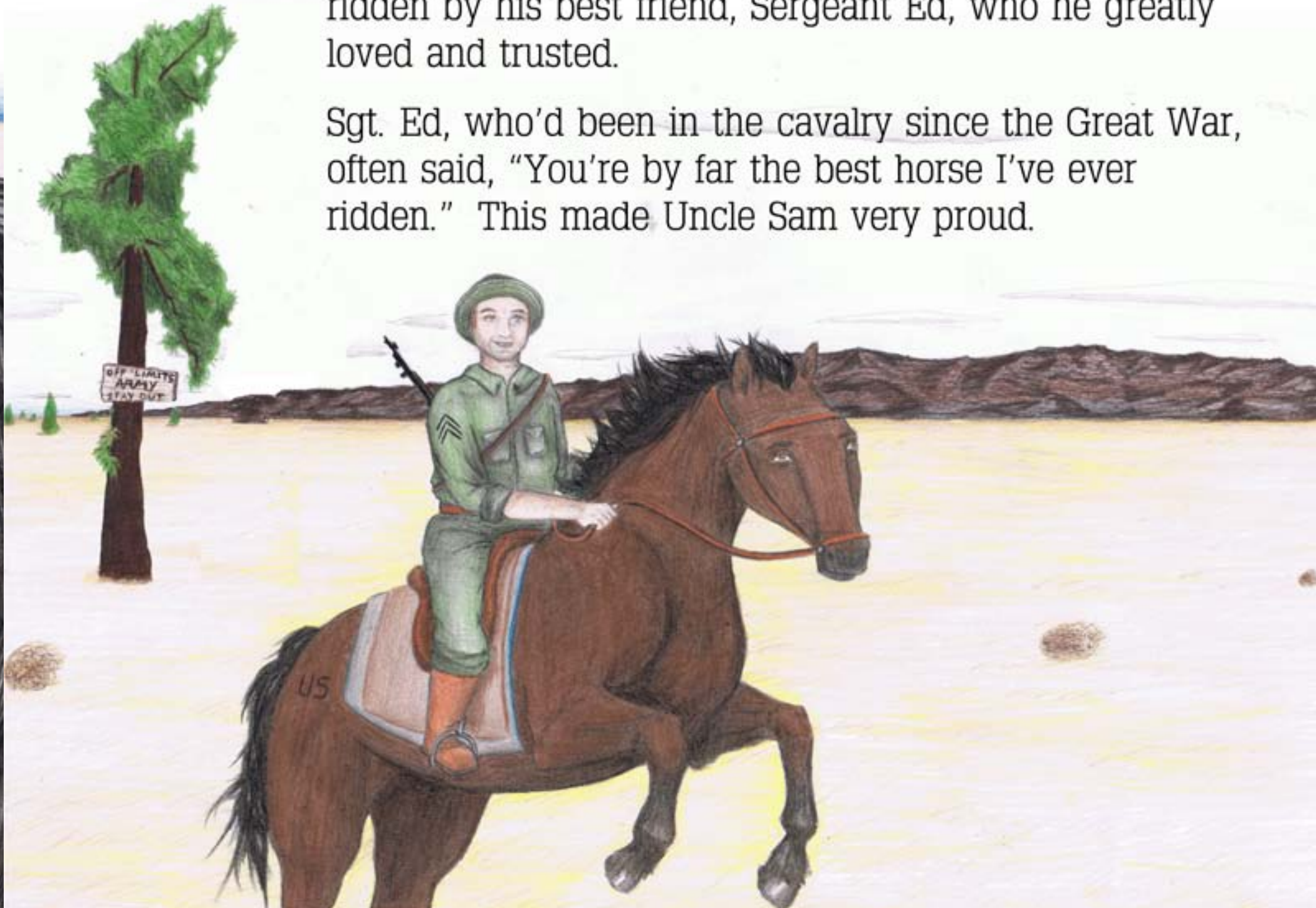


Uncle Sam had lived all of his life in west Texas at a place called Fort Bliss. His name came from the letters 'U.S.' branded on his flank. It showed that he belonged to the United States Army's 1st Cavalry.



During Sam's seven years in the cavalry, he'd been ridden by his best friend, Sergeant Ed, who he greatly loved and trusted.

Sgt. Ed, who'd been in the cavalry since the Great War, often said, "You're by far the best horse I've ever ridden." This made Uncle Sam very proud.



Civil War Spread

Sam was justifiably proud of how his family had long been a part of cavalry history. Two of his great grandpas had fought in the American Civil War at the Battle of Pleasant Hill, Louisiana. Sam loved telling how one had been on the Northern side while the other was with the Rebels.

One day during the Summer of 1941, Sergeant Ed said,

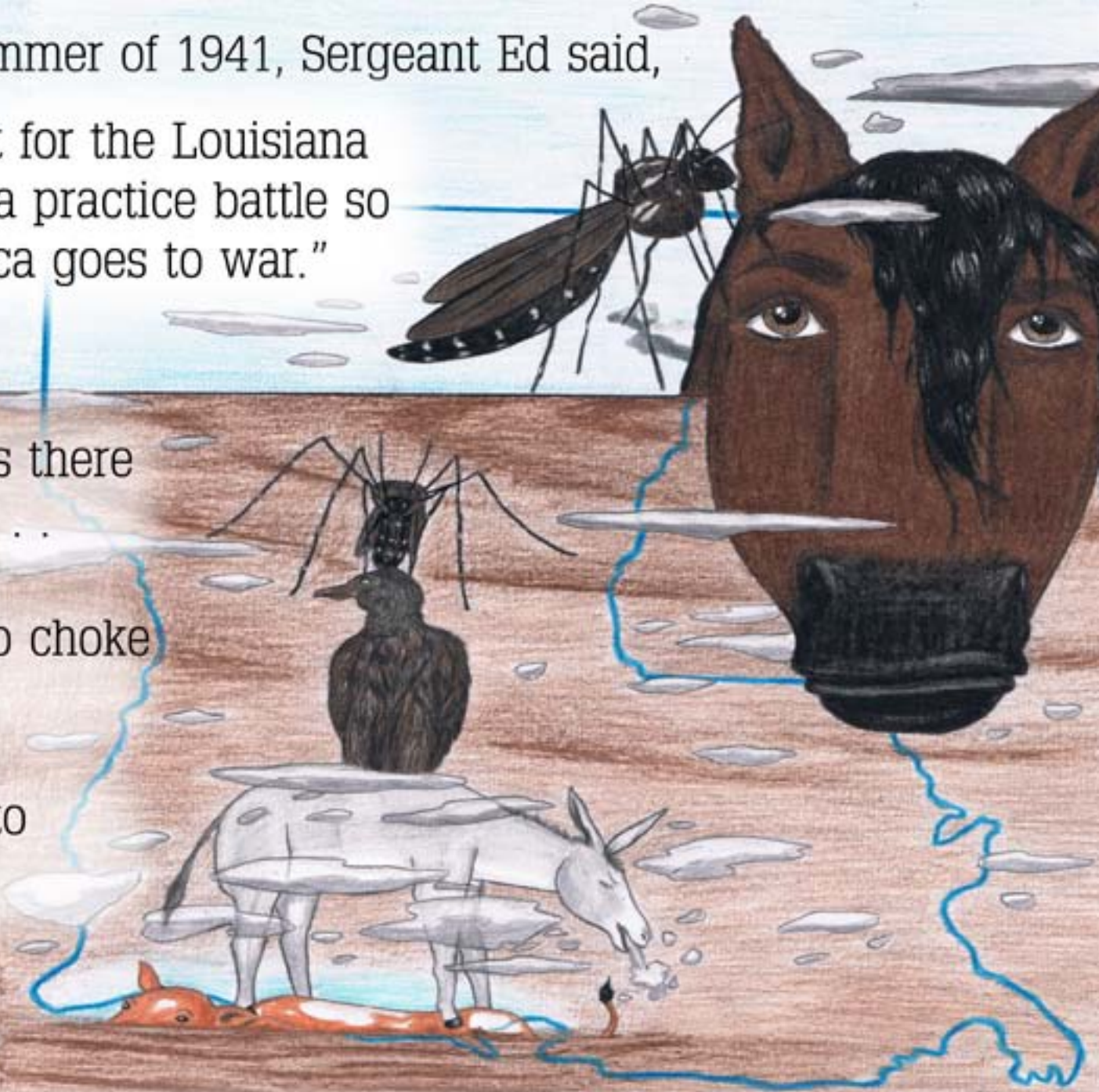
“Sam, we’re going west for the Louisiana Army Maneuvers. It’s a practice battle so we’ll be ready if America goes to war.”

“They say the mosquitos there are as big as buzzards . . .

the dust thick enough to choke a grown mule . . .

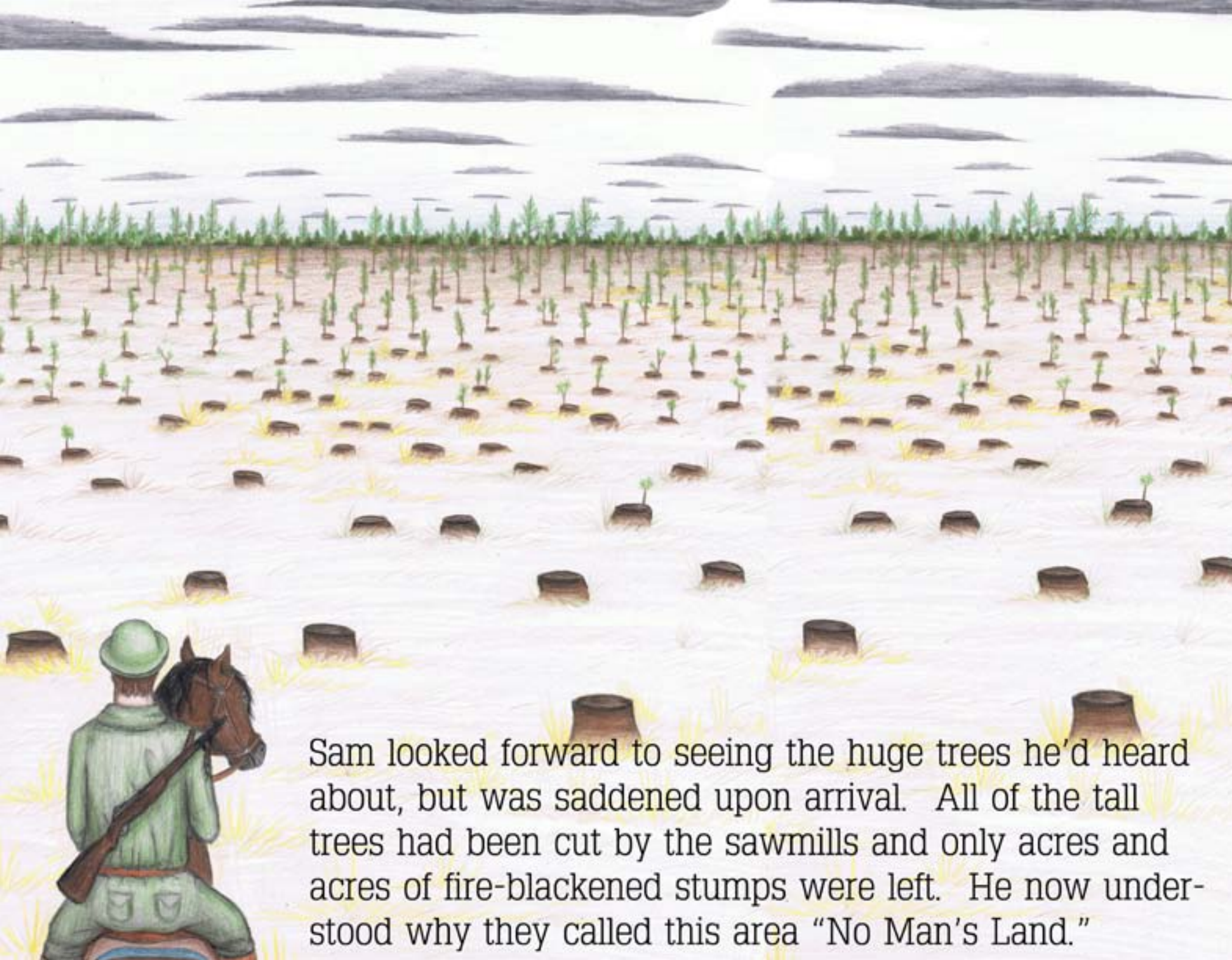
and mud deep enough to drown a calf.”

Sam snorted. He’d never seen bugs, dust, or mud that could stop him. He was also thrilled to be going to the place where his ancestors fought.



So, Uncle Sam and thousands of cavalry horses and soldiers traveled by train across Texas to a part of Louisiana known as “The No Man’s Land.”

Train Image



Sam looked forward to seeing the huge trees he'd heard about, but was saddened upon arrival. All of the tall trees had been cut by the sawmills and only acres and acres of fire-blackened stumps were left. He now understood why they called this area "No Man's Land."

J.H. Family Tree

About a week after arriving is when Sam met a strong mule named John Henry. His father had been a plow horse and his mother was a small

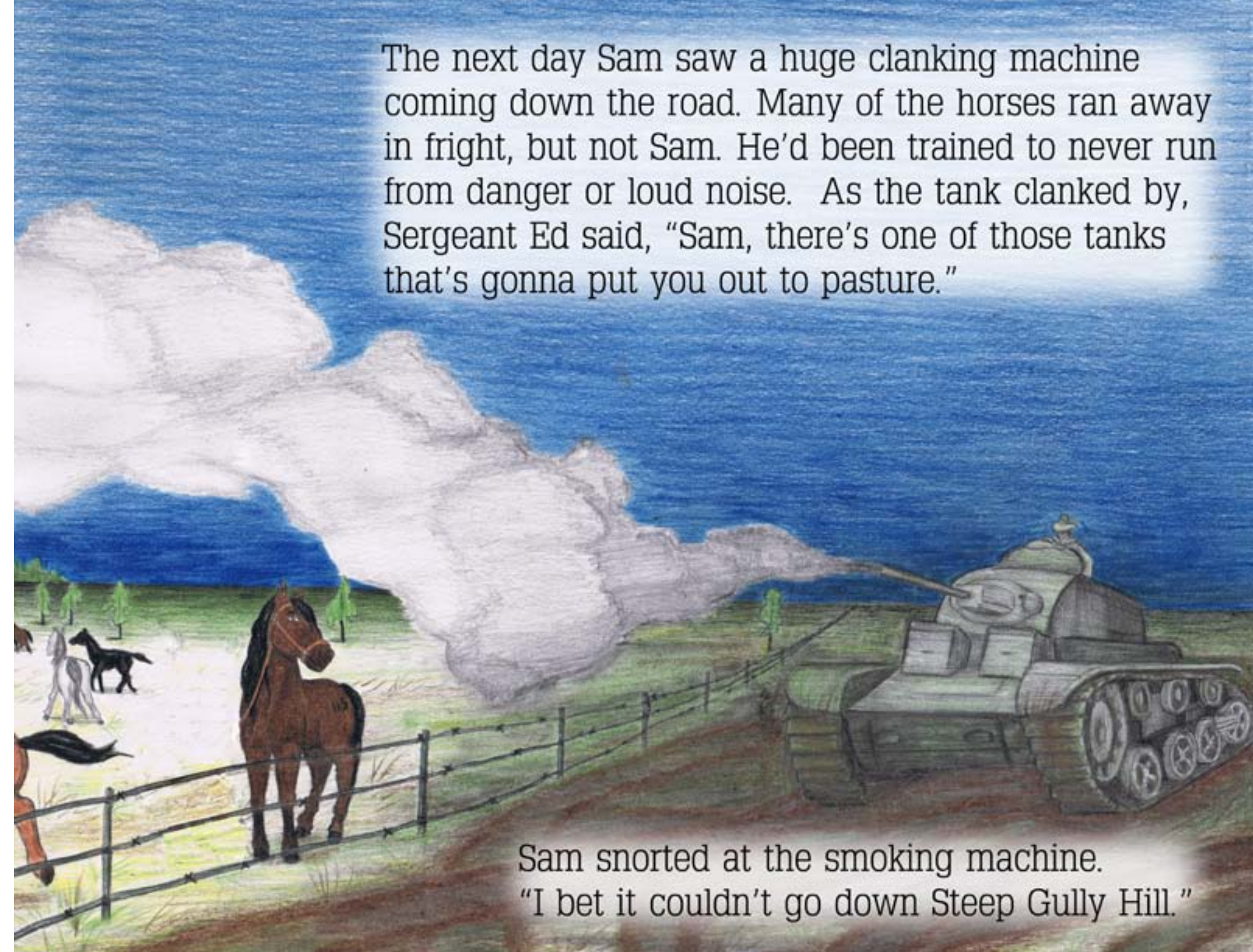


John Henry would reminisce about roaming the vast longleaf pine forests with his father "Now Sam, I don't have as much horse sense as you, but when I looked up at those tall trees, I knew there was a God that made 'em."

One day as Uncle Sam and Sgt. Ed were training near Camp Claiborne, their unit came to a place called Steep Gully Hill. None of the horses and riders was brave enough to charge down the hill. Sergeant Ed stopped at the cliff edge and whispered, "Can we do it, Sam?"

Sam snorted, shook his mane, and safely clawed down the hill. After that, the soldiers gave him a new name: "Sure-footed Sam."

Steep Hill Image



The next day Sam saw a huge clanking machine coming down the road. Many of the horses ran away in fright, but not Sam. He'd been trained to never run from danger or loud noise. As the tank clanked by, Sergeant Ed said, "Sam, there's one of those tanks that's gonna put you out to pasture."

Sam snorted at the smoking machine.
"I bet it couldn't go down Steep Gully Hill."

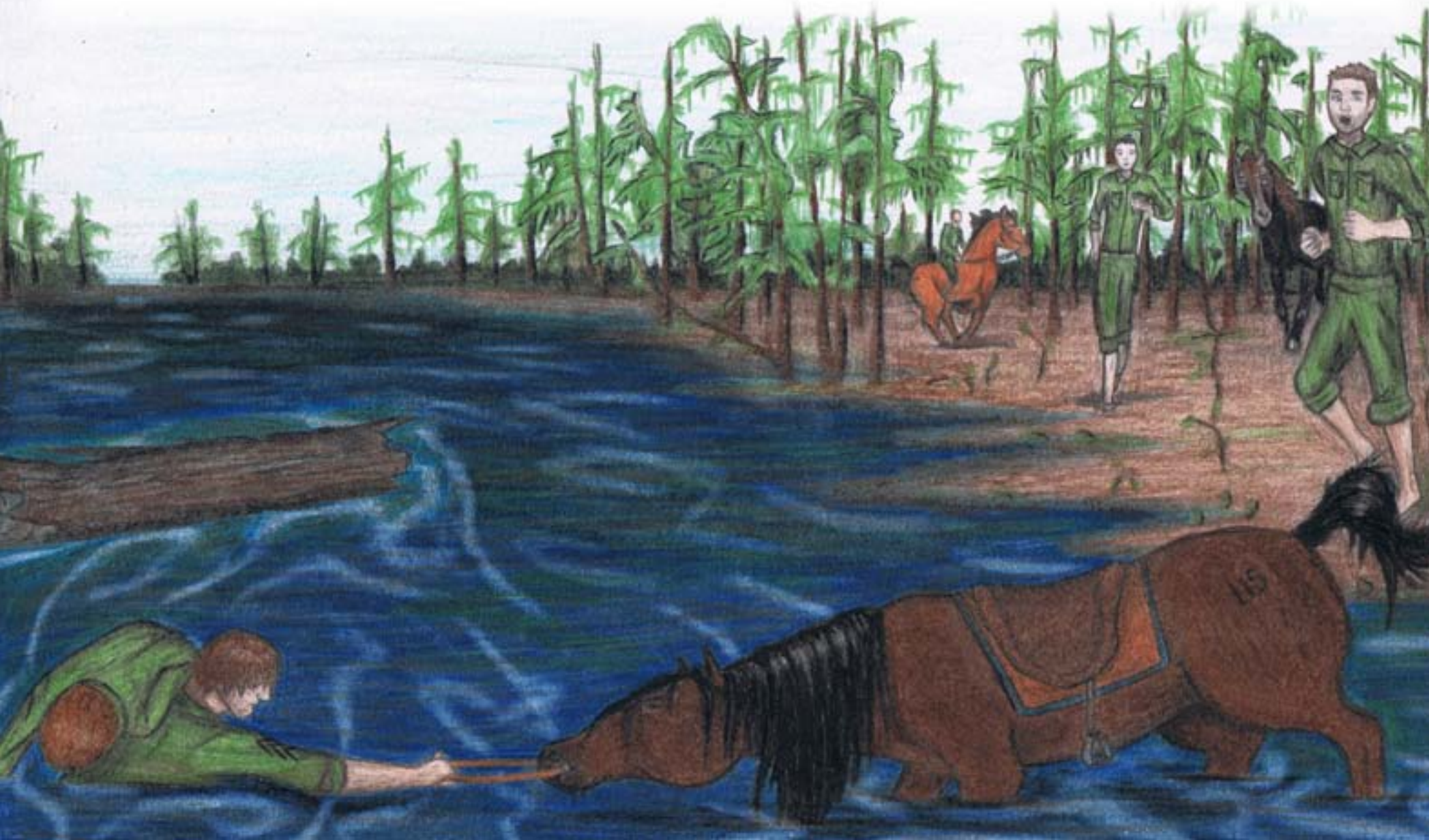
Sam heard about another new vehicle soldiers called a “peep.” They said it could go anywhere a horse or mule could. Sam dreamed about this strange little car and wanted to see one.



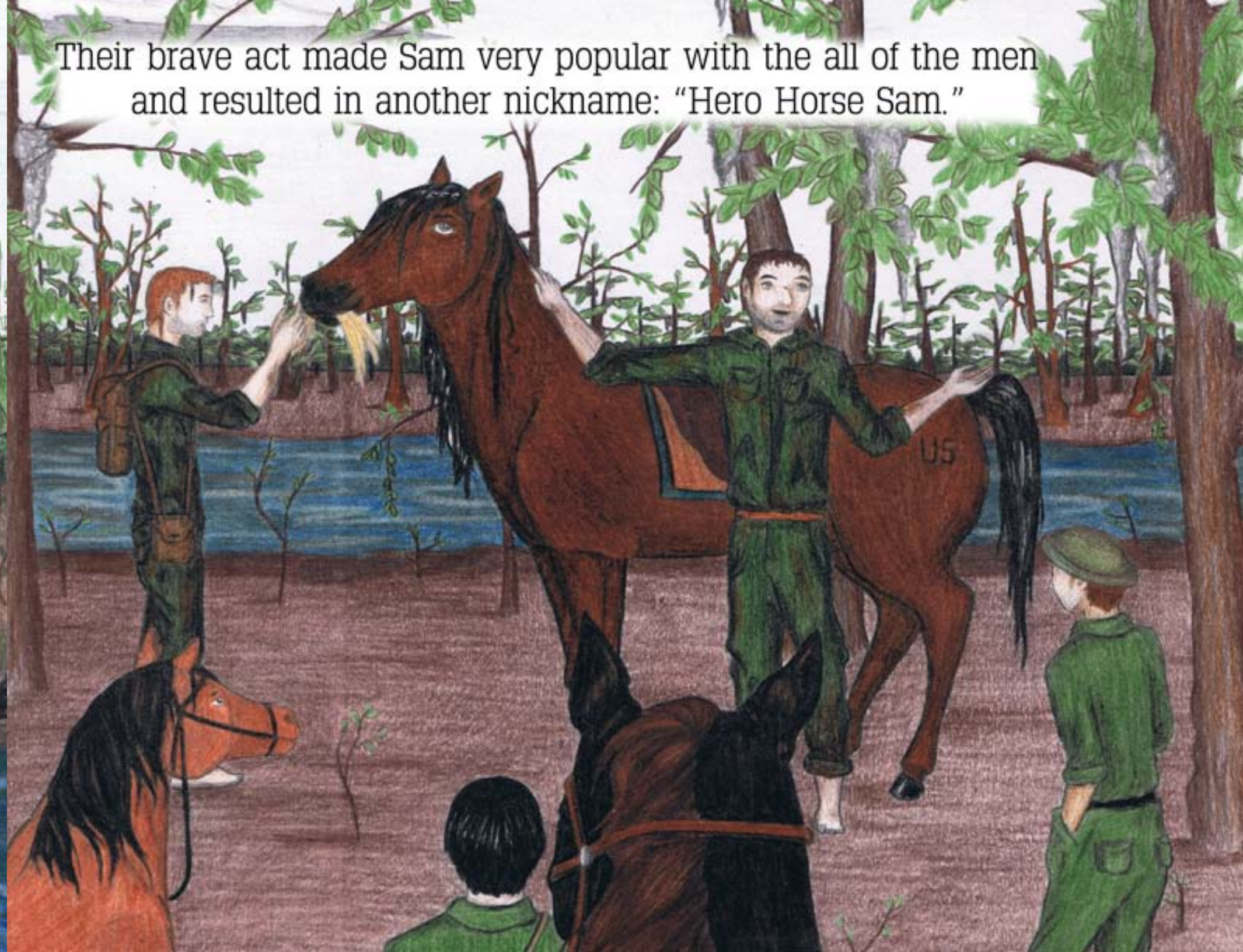
On the first day of the battle, he saw his first peep—or “jeep” as it was now being called. It was a strange square-looking little car. He watched it climb a nearby muddy hill. When the soldiers walked away, Sam told John Henry. “It’s as sure-footed as we are. I guess there’s more than one type of horsepower.”

climbing jeep image

As Sergeant Ed and Sam crossed a flooded creek, a soldier wading across was swept away by the strong current. With Sam's help, Sergeant Ed rescued the soldier.



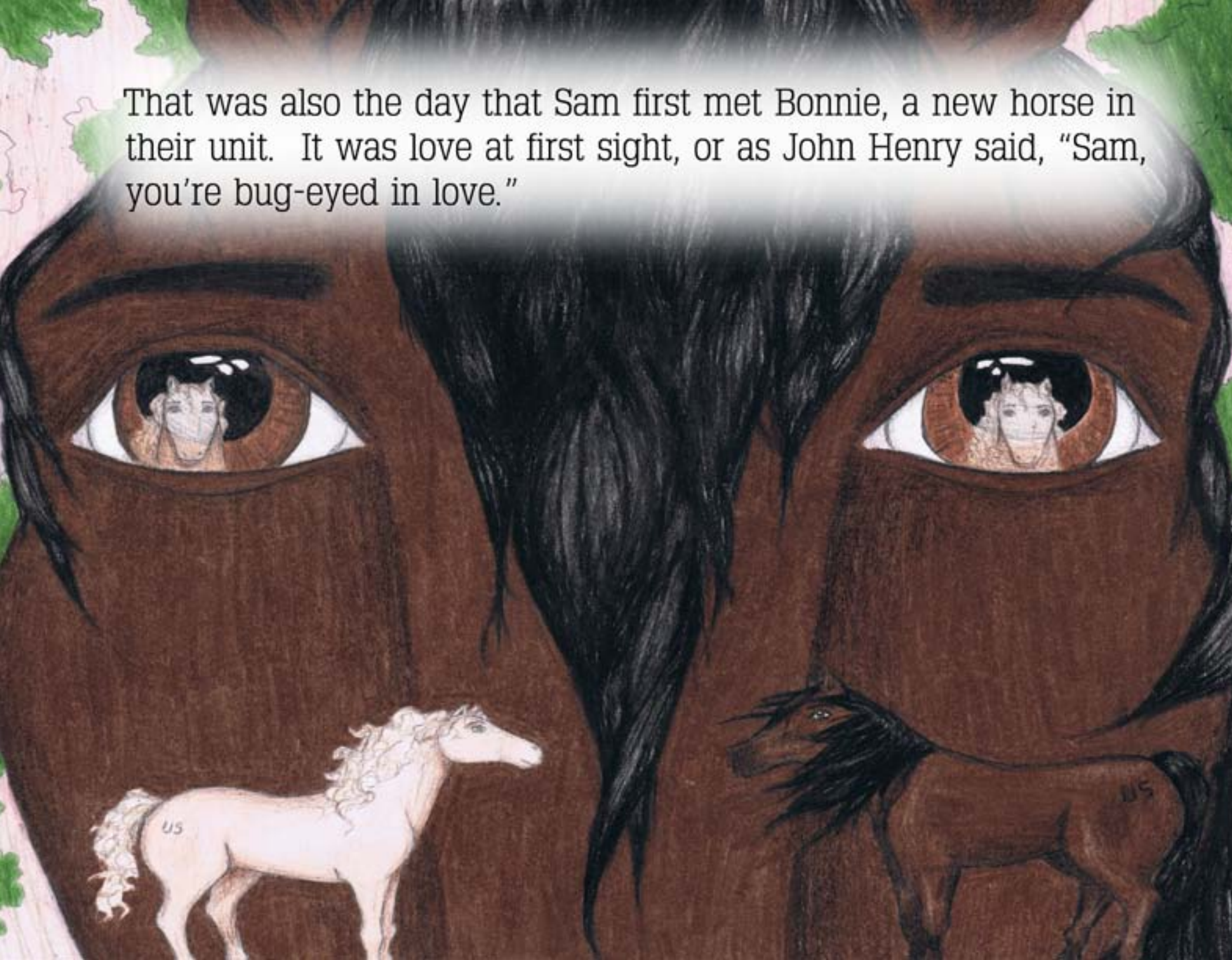
Their brave act made Sam very popular with all of the men and resulted in another nickname: "Hero Horse Sam."



River Crossing Spread *Image*

Sam's cavalry unit was part of the Blue Army which attacked north toward Shreveport. While scouting for the enemy Red Army, they were part of over six thousand cavalymen crossing the Sabine River. The First Cavalry suprised enemy tanks near Pleasant Hill, the site of the famous Civil War battle.

That was also the day that Sam first met Bonnie, a new horse in their unit. It was love at first sight, or as John Henry said, "Sam, you're bug-eyed in love."



When the war games ended, all of the cavalry soldiers were proud of how they'd done. However, bad news circulated among them: the Army had decided to stop using horses.

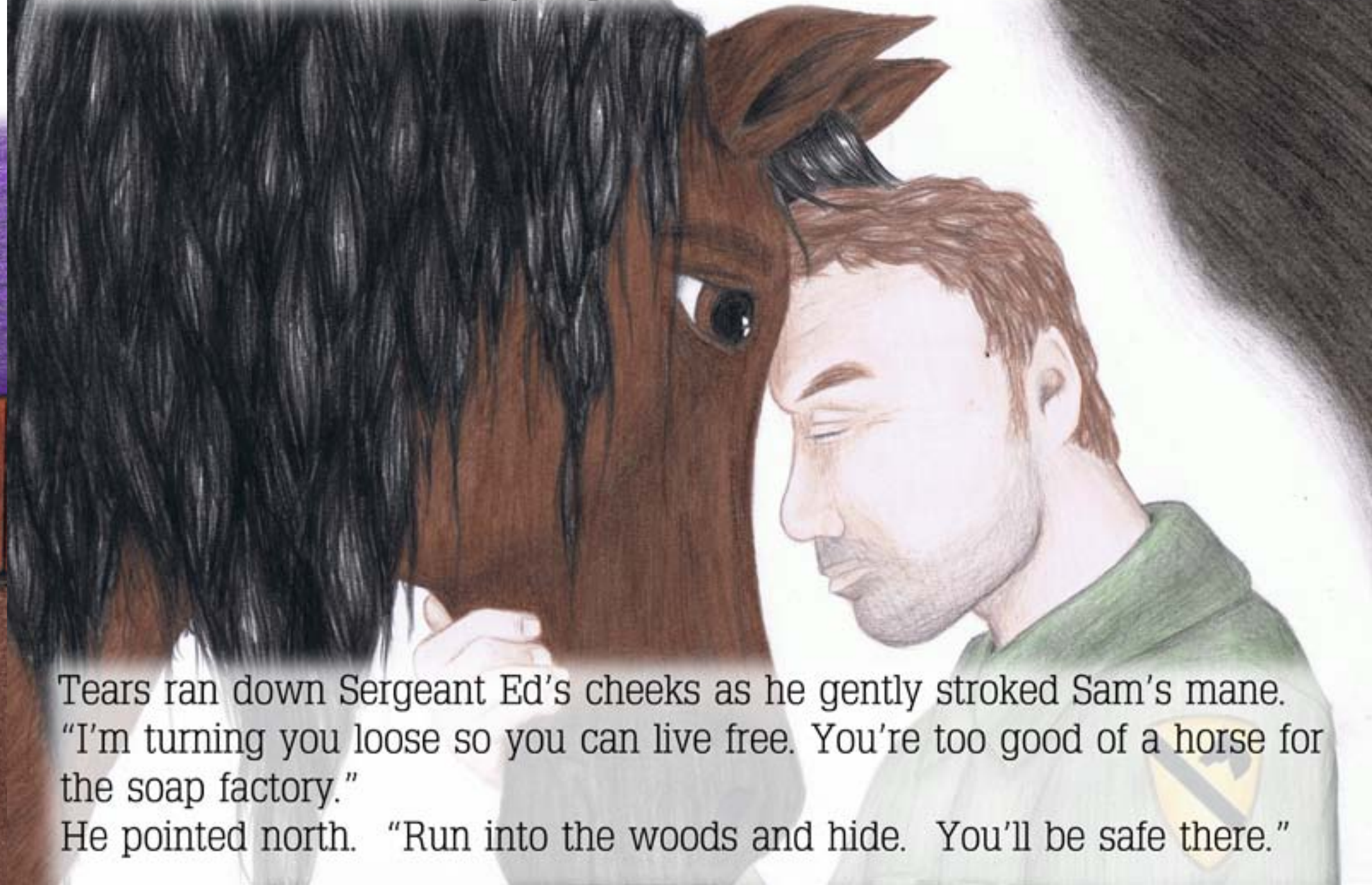


The Maneuvers had shown that tanks, trucks, and jeeps were the future of the Army, not horses and mules. Many stories circulated about what would become of the thousands of horses like Sam. None were good.

That night Sam and Bonnie talked for a long time about their future, and because they were in love they made a promise that they would stay together no matter what. Sam said, "Bonnie, I'm not sure what a 'soap factory' is, but if you go, I'm going too."



A week later, on the night before returning to Texas, Sergeant Ed slipped to Sam's stall. "Sam, I know you don't understand, but I'm letting you go."

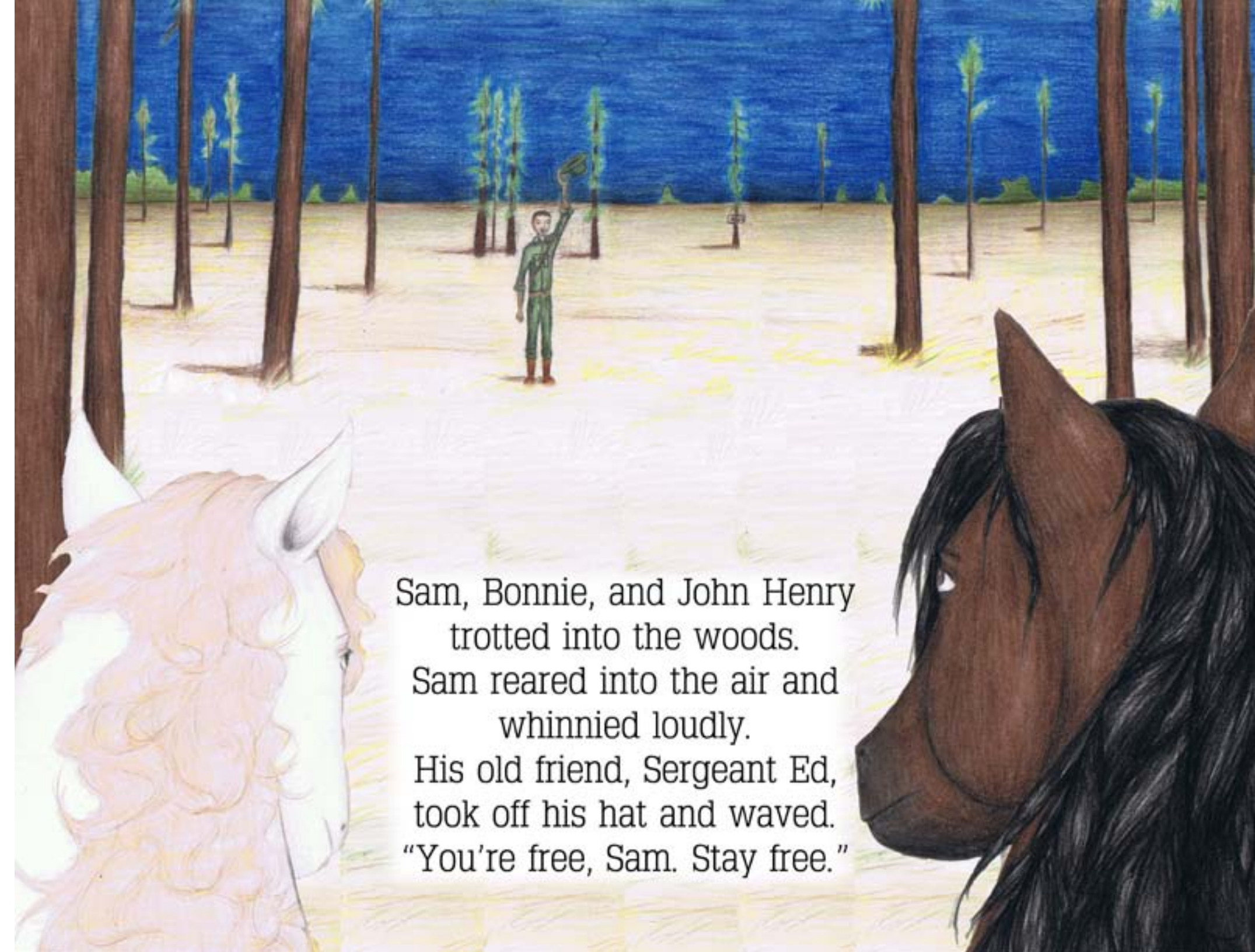


Tears ran down Sergeant Ed's cheeks as he gently stroked Sam's mane. "I'm turning you loose so you can live free. You're too good of a horse for the soap factory." He pointed north. "Run into the woods and hide. You'll be safe there."

Sergeant Ed opened the pen and led Sam outside, removing his bridle and reins. When Sam wouldn't leave, he slapped him on the flank, "Get out of here."

But Sam stood still, snorting and nodding toward Bonnie and John Henry. Sergeant Ed laughed. "Well, if I'm going to get in trouble for letting you go, I might as well free your friends too."

Let My Friends Go Image



Sam, Bonnie, and John Henry trotted into the woods. Sam reared into the air and whinnied loudly. His old friend, Sergeant Ed, took off his hat and waved. "You're free, Sam. Stay free."



It's now been seventy years since Sam, Bonnie, and John Henry escaped into the woods. The stumps are all gone, replaced by towering pine trees that seem to reach to heaven.

Several hundred wild horses still roam Kisatchie National Forest near Fort Polk, many of them the grandchildren of Sam and Bonnie. The woods of western Louisiana have been their home for seventy years. Hopefully, they'll be free there for many years to come.

Sam, Bonnie, and colt image



Curt Iles writes from his hometown of Dry Creek, Louisiana. He is the author of eight books celebrating life in the Piney Woods. He can be reached at www.creekbank.net



Jade Ross is an emerging artist from Alexandria, Louisiana. A senior at Alexandria Senior High, she enjoys art, karaoke, family, and friends.

The design editor of Uncle Sam, Julian Quebedeaux, is a Dry Creek native is studying film at the University of New Orleans. Being a ninja, if you're lucky, you might catch him on his website: www.ninjamanstudios.com

Author's Notes

Recently someone from my rural area asked, "What do you do for a living?" "I'm a writer."

They smiled and said, "That's good. We like horses too."

I'm a writer who lives among a population of riders. It's a part of our history and culture in the area I love called No Man's Land.

The goal of my writing is always to entertain, educate, and encourage. I hope Uncle Sam does that for your children and you.

If you enjoyed Uncle Sam's story, I believe you'll enjoy its companion historical novel, *A Spent Bullet*. It tells the story of the 1941 Louisiana Army Maneuvers through the eyes of a young rural schoolteacher and a Milwaukee, Wisconsin soldier.

Visit www.creekbank.net to learn more about *A Spent Bullet* as well as the other nine books from our Creekbank Stories collection.

Curt Iles

