LEO KESSLER

DOGS OF WAR



BOOKS ONE TO FOUR

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DOGS OF WAR PART ONE

by Leo Kessler

Featuring:
Forced March
Devil's Shield
SS Panzer Battalion
Claws of Steel

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The DOGS OF WAR Books are based on the memoirs of the former SS officer, Kuno von Dodenburg. The manuscripts were discovered by Leo Kessler in a second-hand shop in Berne. No one could explain how they had arrived there, but from the facts that Leo Kessler was able to piece together, the following story emerged.

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Kuno von Dodenburg joined the Berlin SS *Reitersturm*, a voluntary SS cavalry unit, in 1935 while he was still in high school. The von Dodenburgs had always been cavalry officers and his father, a General, had not objected to what he called the 'temporary aberration'. Privately he told his old cronies from the First World War that he didn't mind the boy joining the 'black pack' – for a while, at least. He'd learn to ride and the Reitersturm was patronised by the cream of Berlin society. Indeed its ranks included a couple of Hohenzollern princes from the old Monarchy. But one year later when young von Dodenburg graduated from high school and it was time for him to join the elite 'Cavalry Regiment, Four', his father's old unit, he was no longer interested in the *Wehrmacht*. In spite of the old General's heated protests, the 18-year-old boy volunteered for the Black Guards and was accepted into the newly created Adolf Hitler *Leibstandarte* – the Adolf Hitler Bodyguard Regiment. Unlike his contemporaries who joined the regular Army, he did not immediately become an officer-cadet, but was forced to serve in the ranks for some months, as was the SS custom. (The experience was later to prove useful when he came to describe the life of an ordinary SS trooper in his post-war books.) Finally he was accepted for officer training and was sent to the SS Cadet School at Bad Toelz in Bavaria.

A year later he graduated with honours and was posted to Himmler's staff, probably on the premise that a member of the old Prussian military aristocracy would add a little tone to the 'upstart SS'. Here he came under the influence of the 'Duke of Swabia', *SS Brigadeführer* Gottlob ('Praise-God') Berger, an energetic, unscrupulous First World War veteran, who was Himmler's principal adviser. As Berger wrote to his chief many years later in

a letter dated 9th March 1943, and with his usual lack of modesty, "My Reichsführer confides in me and tells me things personally which he would never do unless he was completely at ease with me."

Berger was the father of the Armed SS, Himmler's own private army, and it was he who inspired the young von Dodenburg with his own concept of a new type of soldier –a combination of hunter-poacher-athlete, an idea he had stolen from the British military expert, Captain Basil Liddell Hart, an ideological warrior who was prepared to fight and die for the cause of national socialism.

In Berger's opinion, the traditional Wehrmacht generals wanted to wage the next war as they had done the last one – with a citizen army based on mass conscription. Berger, however, was a believer in a highly trained and fast moving military elite. Von Dodenburg was fired by the General's concept of modern war and when the Germans invaded Poland in 1939 he requested a transfer back to his old regiment, the Leibstandarte, hoping to be able to put Berger's ideas into practice.

He, and other young enthusiastic officers like him, were able to do so, but at tremendous cost in human life. In his first battle in Bzura (Central Poland) he was wounded and received the Iron Cross, Third Class (it was to be the first of six wounds and the first of his many decorations, which included the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, before the war ended).

The years passed. Von Dodenburg fought in France and later in the Balkans and Greece, but he began to show his real talent as a commander in Russia in 1942 when the steam started to go out of 'Operation Barbarossa'. In December of that year when the Red Army launched a surprise counter-attack over the River Donetz, the newly promoted Major von Dodenburg was ordered by his new regimental commander Colonel Geier – 'the Vulture' of whom we shall hear more later – to break through to the trapped 240th Infantry Division which was trying to fight its way back to the German lines, although encumbered with over fifteen hundred wounded men.

At the head of his 800-strong SS Assault Battalion Wotan, von Dodenburg fought his way to the trapped division, cutting through a Siberian rifle corps to do so. Forming an armoured defensive position around the slow-moving division with its long convoy of ambulances and horse-drawn carts laden with wounded, he battled back to the Donetz. There he discovered that while the ice-covered river was thick enough to support the division's transport, it was too weak for his heavy Mark IV tanks. Another commander

might have told himself he had done enough, destroyed his tanks and made his way across on foot, but not Major von Dodenburg. Leaving the infantry *stubble-hoppers* to struggle across to the safety of the German lines, Assault Battalion Wotan turned and fought their way twenty kilometres up the river until they found and captured a bridge which would carry the tanks. No one was surprised when Hitler himself presented von Dodenburg with the Knight's Cross.

But von Dodenburg was not simply a glory hunter. He was not afraid to grab a rifle and fight side by side with his soldiers when the going got tough. In the autumn of 1943, for instance, when a massive Soviet tank attack swamped his position, he went after the huge Russian T-34s personally, armed with an infantryman's bazooka. Within the hour he had knocked out four and completely reversed the position. When his shame-faced men emerged from their holes, all he said was, "I suppose that qualifies me for the combat infantryman's badge?"

But Russia left its scars, both physical and mental, on von Dodenburg. He had gone to Russia, confident of victory and in the National Socialist cause. He came out of it in December 1943, with his shattered arm hanging by a few shreds of flesh and his confidence gone. In the old cavalry hospital at Heidelberg he began to take a look at himself and his country during the long period of his recovery.

Just before the attempt on Hitler's life in July, 1944, old General von Dodenburg, who was party to the plot, took it upon himself to destroy most of his son's notes, but from the few scraps of paper and the odd letter which remained it is clear that Kuno von Dodenburg was already a member of the resistance to Hitler, at least in spirit. One fragment of those 1943 notes read, "German occupation policy in the East is a masterpiece of ineptitude; within a year it has achieved the considerable and astonishing feat of turning pro-German peoples into partisans roaming the forests, thirsting for the blood of the men they welcomed as liberators from communist oppression in 1941." Another records that "German policy is one of ruthless brutality, employing methods used centuries ago against ignorant black slaves and executed by uneducated louts who proclaim themselves members of the Master Race." But it is a letter to an old comrade at the front which really expresses the depth of von Dodenburg's despair. "SS spirit," he wrote on 2 January, 1944, "I'm always hearing SS spirit! Shit! It's non-existent!"

In the spring of 1944 he returned to his old battalion which had now

become Kampfgruppe Wotan, having been built up to brigade strength with an influx of 18-year-olds, who came streaming to the elite formation in their hundreds, eager to pay their tribute to Hitler with their blood. Thus its new commander became the youngest full colonel in the Armed SS.

In Normandy and in Holland von Dodenburg led his Kampfgruppe Wotan with a recklessness which seemed to show that he could not wait for an enemy bullet to put an end to his wasted young life. But he was not fated to die on the battlefield. In the last great offensive of the German Army in the West, the Battle of the Bulge, he was captured when his Tiger was knocked out by a lone New Yorker – a Jewish bazookaman who, two weeks before, had been a cook in a rear-line outfit.

Von Dodenburg spent two years in Allied prison camps, 'finding himself', as he was wont to say whenever his comrades remarked upon his strange apathy. In the summer of 1946 he found himself, and escaped from the Dachau prison compound with commendable adroitness. With the aid of the Odessa Organization, the SS escape society, he fled to Italy where he began to write in earnest. But no one wanted to read his thinly fictionalized accounts of his life in the SS Assault Battalion Wotan, especially in his native country, where the SS was a dirty word to publishers who wanted to forget that the years 1933-45 had ever happened.

The money that his former friends in the Armed SS managed to smuggle out of Germany began to dry up. In the booming new Germany of the 'economic miracle' they did not want to risk their newly gained wealth and position by associating with Kuno von Dodenburg, the epitome of the SS officer. He struggled to make ends meet, working as a third-class translator into German in a fourth-class Roman agency during the day and covering page after page with his accounts of long-dead men who had once made up Assault Battalion Wotan during the night.

His health started to give out. He was befriended by a plump, plain and motherly typist in the translation agency. She became his mistress and in due course he moved in with her. Under her doting care his health improved, but only for a while.

In 1952 he was rushed to Rome's German Hospital, a dying man. The Jewish bazookaman, who was now back as a short-order cook in Brooklyn, unknowingly put paid to the life of the Black Guard's most decorated and youngest full colonel. According to Professor Donelli, the Italian surgeon who operated on him eight years later, the US Army surgeon had overlooked

a massive piece of rocket shrapnel which had lodged itself deep inside his body. Kuno von Dodenburg died on the night of 3 June 1952, attended only by his Italian mistress. It was only with difficulty that she could understand his last words, whispered in hoarse, hesitant German, "We were intoxicated by a vision of great power then. It gripped us like a huge frenzy, the frenzy of power."

Kuno von Dodenburg was thirty-four years old when he died.

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For twenty years von Dodenburg's manuscripts disappeared until they were found in June 1973, when they were translated by Leo Kessler. They enable us to hear the true voice of the Armed SS for the first time. For in World War II, the Armed SS, Hitler's Praetorian Guard, became the scourge of Europe, a ruthless, heartless collection of elite soldiers who fought for an idea which has long since lost its validity and a glory that has vanished forever.

Charles Whiting

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

For the sake of simplicity and better understanding the normal Army ranks have been used throughout this translation instead of the Armed SS designation of Kuno von Dodenburg's original. For those, however, who may care to work out the exact ranks of the members of SS Assault Battalion Wotan, the following table gives the most important ones:

KEY: *SS – German Army – British Army*
Standartenführer – Oberst – Colonel
Obersturmbannführer – Oberstleutnant – Lt-Colonel
Sturmbannführer – Major – Major
Hauptsturmführer – Hauptmann – Captain
Obersturmführer – Oberleutnant – Lieutenant
Untersturmführer – Leutnant – 2nd Lieutenant
Sturmscharführer – Stabsfeldwebel – Regimental Sergeant Major
Hauptsscharführer – Oberfeldwebel – Sergeant Major
Oberscharführer – Feldwebel – Quartermaster Sergeant
Scharführer – Unterfeldwebel – Staff Sergeant
Unterscharführer – Unteroffizier – Sergeant
Rottenführer – Gefreiter – Corporal
Sturmarm – Oberschutze – Lance Corporal
SS-Mann – Schutze – Private

And among all the many SS units – some 36 Armoured divisions by the end of the war – that saw action there was none more battle-hardened, more brutalized and more ruthless in their devotion to war and violent death than Kuno von Dodenburg's SS Assault Battalion Wotan.

A GLOSSARY OF WOTAN TERMS

Full House – both venereal diseases
Asparagus Tarzan – weakling
Popov, Ivan – Russian soldier
Dice-beaker – Jackboots
Flatman – flat bottle of schnapps
Green-beak, Wet-tail – raw recruit
Ami – American
Base Stallion – rear area soldier, base wallah
Bone-mender – doctor
Warm Brother – homosexual
Kitchen-bull – army cook
Dead Soldier – empty bottle
Field Mattress – German Army female auxiliary
Tin – decorations
Throat-ache – Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross
Moss, Green Leaves – money
Old Man – tinned meat
Cancer Stick – cigarette
Giddi-up Soup – horse meat soup
Stubble Hopper – infantryman
Reeperbahn Equaliser – brass knuckles
Pavement Tail – Street walker
Parisian – Contraceptive
Flipper – hand
Turnip – head

FORCED MARCH

DOGS OF WAR – VOLUME ONE
by Leo Kessler

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“You belong now to SS Assault Battalion Wotan and in the manner of your death you cannot bring dishonour to Wotan. For when you are long forgotten, your idle bones mouldering under some French clod, this Battalion will be remembered. Do you understand that, soldiers?”

The Vulture, CO of SS Battalion Wotan, Dieppe, France
July, 1942

BOOK I – OPERATION JUBILEE

"Mountbatten, understand this. Failure at Dieppe is what I demand of you!"

Premier Churchill to Lord Louis Mountbatten
July 1942

CHAPTER 1

“Great God and all his triangles!” Sergeant Schulze of SS Battalion Wotan cursed. He raised himself in the field hospital bed and gave one of his well-known farts.

Opposite him in the long ward One-Egg – the young panzer grenadier, who had had his left testicle shot off before Moscow – tut-tutted; and next to him the Lung, wounded at the crossing of the River Bug, bubbled a little louder than usual.

“Just letting off a little green smoke, that's all," Schulze mumbled, and tried to scratch the end of his big nose, but without success. This was not surprising, since both his hands were enclosed in thick plaster up to the wrists: the result of his being rather slow in getting rid of a Soviet stick grenade in the confused hand-to-hand fighting just outside Kiev.

In the next bed Matz's springs squeaked as he turned round painfully. "What's shitting you now, Schulze?" he demanded.

Schulze looked across at his running mate from Wotan. Matz's blond hair was hopelessly matted; he hadn't shaved since the hospital train had delivered them at Berlin's La Charité Hospital from the front two weeks ago; and cigar ash lay over the blue and white striped cover like snow. "Are you addressing me, Corporal?" he asked severely.

"Who do you think, you big soft wet-tail? Winston shitty Spencer shitty Churchill?"

“Put a 'sergeant' on that Schulze, Corporal," barked Schulze. "And remember to show a bit more respect for a wounded NCO, or I'll take that peg leg of yours" – he indicated Matz's artificial limb hanging over the edge of the white hospital bed – "and stick it so far up yer ass that yer eyes'll pop out!"

"All right, Sergeant Schulze. What's up? What yer bellyaching about? We're in a nice safe hospital a thousand kilometres behind the front, with no hairy-assed Popovs trying to shoot the eggs off'n us. What more do you want, Sergeant Schulze?"

"I want out of here, Matz, that's what I want. I'm brassed off by this place. No fucking sauce – that big bone-mender took my last flatman off me this morning. No fucking tail. And no fucking Wotan!" The big ex-docker

sighed sadly. "We've been abandoned by the Battalion, Matz. At the mercy of these banana-sucking bone-menders, every one of them a warm brother, if you ask me. Me with two useless flippers and you with one sodding leg already off and the other likely be sabred off any day now the way those asparagus Tarzans of medics are carrying on." Schulze hawked miserably and directed a gob of phlegm into the brass spittoon in the centre of the long ward.

Sister Klara, the ugly Red Cross nurse in her forties who was now washing the panzer grenadier's lower body, looked angrily up from her task. "I forbid you to do that in my presence, Sergeant," she said severely, "and watch your language, or I'll have to talk to the chief doctor about your behaviour." She sniffed self-righteously and turned back to her task. The panzer grenadier closed his eyes again in blissful ecstasy.

"That's what happens to an ugly woman, Matzi," Schulze said, responding to the challenge. "I mean an ugly bloke can go out and buy himself a piece of that pavement tail down there on the Kudamm thoroughfare. But yer ugly woman – what can she do? She can't buy it." He shrugged and winced with the pain. "All she can do is finger herself crazy."

Sister Klara, still busy washing the panzer grenadier's lower body, flushed scarlet. An amused Schulze could see the blush creeping down her scraggy neck under the severe bun.

"Of course in France they have houses for that kind of woman," Matz volunteered, joining in the game.

"What?"

"Knocking shops for ugly women."

Schulze's broad face contorted in mock disgust. "What a piggery!" he exclaimed. "Trust those filthy frogs. Think of any dirty perversion and you'll find, Matzi, that the Frogs invented it. No wonder the Führer in his infinite wisdom did them the favour of occupying their shitting country two years ago – learn them a bit of German decency. I mean Matzi, fancy being forced to stick that little bit o' meat of yours into her – even for money!" He shuddered melodramatically.

"To be honest, Schulze," Matz said, as if he were seriously considering the proposition. "I wouldn't exactly say no. The old five-fingered widow's getting very slack now."

"It's all right for you, Matzi," Schulze grunted mournfully. "With these flippers of mine tied up like this, I can't even enjoy a bit of the old five-

fingered widow. I mean look over there. One-Egg's doing himself a bit of all right," he indicated the panzer grenadier, his mouth wide open, breathing fast as Sister Klara washed carefully around his genitals. "Even he's getting a cheap thrill."

"And I bet she is too," Matz added maliciously, his little eyes sparkling wickedly. "Look how she's holding his peter-man. Yer'd think she's handling the Prussian crown jewels the way she's got hold of it. Great crap on the Christmas Tree, I bet she's at it tonight like a fiddler's elbow once she gets into her little bed. Grr..." The little Corporal growled throatily.

This was too much for Sister Klara. She dropped her wash cloth over the panzer grenadier's penis. "I shall report you to the Chief," she said thickly through her tears. "He'll see that you two foul-mouthed beasts land where you belong – in the punishment ward!" And with that she was gone, leaving the panzer grenadier staring disconsolately at the wash cloth.

Schulze looked at Matz mockingly. "Now what was that in aid of, Matzi?" he asked. "Did we say something?"

But before Matz could reply, the first thin wail of the air raid sirens outside indicated that the RAF would soon be paying one of its nightly visits to Berlin. "Red alert," Matz said. "The Tommies'll be over soon, dropping their square eggs as usual, the pigs."

Schulze did not seem to hear. "We're off, Matzi," he announced abruptly. "That ugly cow's not putting me in the punishment ward, drinking cold sweat and eating lousy giddi-up soup. No thank you. We're off!"

"But where?" Matz protested.

Schulze sucked his big yellow teeth thoughtfully. "First we'll sink a Korn – perhaps two. Then a bit of that pavement tail to get rid of the dirty water from our chests. Mine's already up to my throat. If I don't get a bit of the other soon, it'll choke me. Then we're off to find the Wotan."

Matz looked a the big sergeant incredulously. "Have you got all yer cups in yer cupboard, Schulze? How we gonna get out of here? You with yer flaming flippers and me with my sodding foot. I can't walk, you know that."

"Don't wet yer skivvies, Matzi," Schulze answered easily. "I'll soon fix that." He raised his voice. "Hey, you One-Egg I Get yer paws off'n that disgusting bit of meat of yours and wheel in that hospital panzer from the corridor – at the double!"

"But I'm badly wounded in the groin," protested One-Egg. "You'll be very badly wounded in the ass if you don't move it, One-Egg."

The threat worked. Painfully One-Egg heaved himself out of the bed and shuffled to the door, holding his hands protectively to his abdomen.

"If you drop it, I'll yell out!" Matz cried after him.

"Button that lip, Matzi," Schulze ordered impatiently, "and pass me that sabre of yours."

Obediently the one-legged SS man reached across his ceremonial NCO's dagger. Schulze grabbed at it clumsily. and holding it between his two white plaster paws, began sawing through the cord holding up Matz's one remaining leg. Finally he managed to cut through it. Matz's wounded foot, swathed in thick bandages crashed to the bed.

"Heaven, arse and twine," Matz cursed, "can't you be a bit more careful, you big horned ox! That shitting well hurt!"

"Crap in yer cap, cripple!" Schulze snapped unfeelingly, awkwardly tucking his long hospital nightshirt into the top of his black pants. "You seem to forget that you're talking to a non-commissioned officer of the Greater German Army. Pass me my dicebeakers, will yer."

As Matz struggled to reach Schulze's jackboots, One-Egg opened the door to the ward and trundled in the ancient wickerwork bath chair His young face was an ashen-grey. "I think it's opened up again – the wound, I mean," he said sorrowfully.

"Well, don't take long strides then," Schulze rapped without sympathy, "or yet' other egg might fall out of its little nest. Come on, don't stand there like a fart in a trance! Give me a hand to get this little cripple into his pram."

"But where in three devils' name are you going?" One-Egg asked, his curiosity overcoming his pain, as he helped Schulze to lower Matz into the bath chair

"Where are we going?" Schulze echoed. "We're gonna do a three-F."

"What?"

"Christ on a crutch, One-Egg, you still got eggshell behind yer spoons or something – find it, feel it and ferk it, man!"

"Oh," One-Egg answered, "and then, Schulzi?"

"Then, my little battered balls of a panzer grenadier," Schulze cried, "we're off to find the finest battalion in the whole Greater German Army – SS Battalion Wotan!" A moment later he was gone through the swinging doors, pushing Matz in front of him like an evil wizened baby.

CHAPTER 2

"May the Almighty have mercy upon us!" Matz breathed as Schulze pushed him through the throng of excited, loud field-greys waiting for their turn to go upstairs. The great 19th-century salon with its red-plush over-stuffed furniture was packed with whores in their multi-coloured crepe-de-chine underwear. Red-faced sweating maids were running everywhere, bearing silver trays of cigarettes and bottles. The place was obviously doing boom business despite the bombs crashing to the ground outside.

"Cast one of your glassy orbs on all that nooky," Schulze sighed. "Grr, Matzi, it's so good I could eat it with a knife and fork – and no salt!" And listen to those springs going upstairs. Ain't that beautiful music – better than the Horst Wessel Lied and Deutschland über Alles both put together!"

"Look at that one," Matz said, pointing to a huge blonde whore, whose massive breasts were threatening to burst out of her gleaming black slip. "The wood she's got in front of her door!" Carried away by his enthusiasm, he reached out two greedy hands to seize the blonde.

But a hulking artilleryman with the peaked cap and suntanned face of the Afrika Korps pushed in front of him. "Keep yer paws off'n her, you one-legged cripple!" he snarled. "You wait yer turn like the rest of us. I haven't seen a white woman for a month of Sundays. Hold it in yer shiny hand if yer in a hurry. That puny little thing you've probably got won't be much to these girls anyway."

There was a flutter of laughter from the waiting soldiers. While Matz stuttered with rage, Schulze looked the big Afrika Korps artilleryman up and down coldly. "Do you know whom you are addressing, you chimney-sweep run wild?" he asked with frosty politeness. "No, then I shall inform you. You are speaking with a non-commissioned officer of the finest battalion of the finest division in the Armed SS. Namely SS Battalion Wotan of the Adolf Hitler Bodyguard Division."

The artilleryman was not impressed. "I'd like to ask you something?"

"Please."

"I'd like to know, whether your mother was a virgin or not when you were born?" he asked with a sneer. "Or did they find you under a cabbage leaf?"

His sally earned him another burst of laughter from the impatient soldiery. The blonde giggled so much that her right breast flopped out of its black cage. The soldiers whistled and cheered loudly.

Schulze waited till the whistling had died down, controlling himself with difficulty. "Pop to!" he barked as if he were back on the Battalion's parade ground. "Heave up those juiceless ribs! Grind that jaw! Smear that big turnip of yours against the back of your collar! You're talking to an SS non-commissioned officer, man!"

"Sewer Stomach!" grunted the artilleryman.

"I'm going to shear off your ass for those insidious words, soldier," Schulze threatened, his big face flushing crimson.

"Dirty fart-cannon –"

Before Schulze could hit the grinning artilleryman, Matz brought up his artificial leg. The booted foot caught him between his legs. He screamed and sank to his knees. Calmly Schulze brought his clenched plaster hands down on the back of the artillerymen's bent head. He fell soundlessly, face down on the carpet.

Grinning triumphantly, the big NCO pushed Matz through the sudden corridor which had opened up between the ranks of the field-greys, nodding grandly to each side like the Führer making his annual triumphal entrance at the Nuremberg Party Day.

The Madame barred their way. her bosom was thrust underneath her double chin as if she were carrying it on a tray.

"Get a load of that," Matz cracked. "What a marvel of engineering! It's better than the Cologne bridge across the Rhine."

Schulze eyed the Madame's massive bust with naked admiration. "All that meat and no potatoes – whew!"

The Madame wasn't impressed. "What are yer doing with that shitty pram in my establishment?" she demanded. "That'll cost you more moss – green moss." She made her meaning quite clear with a quick gesture of her pudgy be-ringed hand. "Moss, and then you can park it and have a look at the girls."

"Show her, Matzi," Schulze commanded.

"We've got something better than moss, Madame," Matz said eagerly and digging into the compartment beneath the bath chair, started bringing out the things they had looted on their way out of La Charité. "Three tins of Old Man rations, a cartoon of cancer sticks, one kilo of sweat – and this." He held

up the brown bottle. "Joy juice."

"Morphine?" she demanded greedily, her eyes flickering. Like everyone else in the third year of war she knew that the drug brought a fortune on the Berlin black market. The capital was full of wrecked men and women, victims of the battlefield and the home front who only survived by virtue of their daily injection.

"Right in one," Schulze replied. "That should do the trick, Madame, eh?" It did. Within minutes the two of them found themselves half carried upstairs by two of Madame's best girls, the Austrian twins Mitzi and Gerdi and ushered into the brothel's most luxurious room. "Usually we only let officers and gentlemen in here," Madame explained, clutching the bottle of morphine tightly to her magnificent breast.

"Grosse Klasse!" Matz exclaimed in delight, as the two half-naked whores deposited him on the big bed in the corner. "Just like heaven."

Schulze was not so easily pleased. "It's all right for him, Madame," he declared. "The little cripple hasn't got very much to put there in the first place, and in the second, he's a straight up-and-down lover." He thrust a white stiff paw at his own broad chest. "Now I need more room." He leered lecherously at Mitzi. "You see, darling, I'm a real mattress matador. From the side. A nice little movement from the back. And when I'm on top of my form and have use of my flippers I can do it very fine from this way." He winked and made his meaning very clear. The girls giggled and Schulze slapped the Madame on her generous silk-clad rump. "But for tonight and under these special circumstances I'll let it go for once. I'll accept the bed – and don't worry, little mother, I'm gentle with virgins."

Five minutes later Mitzi had pulled off Schulze's dice-beakers and black slacks and was running her delightful snub little Viennese nose along the length of his erect penis, as if she were smelling some particularly beautiful flower, when in the other bed Matz moaned suddenly. "Schulze!"

"What is it, you stupid bastard?" Schulze demanded angrily. "Can't you see you're putting me off my stroke?"

"But I can't... can't –"

"Can't what?"

"Can't get on her!" the little one-legged corporal answered tearfully.

With a muttered curse Schulze turned round. In the dim red light, he could make out Matz's girl naked on the bed, her slim brown legs clutched in her hands high above her head expectantly. Matz, however, was still sitting

on his chair, naked and obviously very ready for the task ahead, drooling at the sight"She's gonna get a very bad cold with her legs open to the draught like that," Schulze commented.

"Please Schulzi, no jokes!" Matz pleaded, his eyes desperate. "I've been dreaming of this for months."

Schulze jumped off the bed. Hastily he padded across the room on his bare feet, his instrument stuck out in front of him like a cop's dub. "Come on, yer lousy perverted little cripple." With one sweep of his bandaged hands he gathered up the one-legged corporal and deposited him in the cradle of the girl's legs. Now try that one for size," he growled.

The whore grunted with pleasure and Matz went into action at once, the bedsprings squeaking like red-hot engine pistons. Schulze wasted no further time either. Outside the bombs were beginning to fall thick and fast. With every fresh explosion, Mitzi gave a delightful little start that added to his pleasure immensely. He took advantage of it, the sweat flooding from his big muscular back.

From the other bed, Matz cried in wild exuberance, "Race yer Schulzi – race yer, yer old bastard."

***

"*Stehenbleiben!*"

The elegant, monocled staff officer reined back his black mount in alarm. "In three devils' name, what are you men up to?" he stuttered, his left eye bulging behind the monocle at the sight of a one-legged drunken soldier sprawled in a nightshirt in his bath chair, clutching a chamber-pot full of brown liquid, with a pair of red lace pants on his shaven head, being pushed by an equally drunken brute of a fellow, his flies unbuttoned, his hands encased in plaster and a wooden leg stuck over his shoulder.

"Taking the morning air," Schulze said helpfully. "It's very nice now the Tommies have unloaded their square eggs and gone."

"Fine morning!" the elegant staff officer exploded. "Man, it's drizzling!"

Schulze looked up and vaguely felt the raindrops on his broad tough face. "So it is, sir. Didn't notice. Hey, Matzi, put yer hand over me beer. God's pissing in it!"

"Blasphemy, too!" the officer bellowed and reined in his mount. "What

in the name of God is the Armed SS coming to?"

"Shit in the wind!" Matz said drunkenly and took another drink of the stale beer that they had brought with them from the brothel an hour before – "to keep us fit while we're looking for the Wotan. Shitty warm brother on a shitty old nag!"

"What did you say?"

"Don't take him serious, sir," Schulze tried to placate the red-faced officer. "They've got to pump the urine out of him every two hours – that's why he's carrying the piss – er chamberpot. It makes him light-headed. The weight being lifted, you see."

The officer choked. Stretching his neck out of his tight collar like a strangulated ostrich, he gasped: "Will you shut up! That man, he... he insulted me!"

"Insulted you," Matz inquired with drunken innocence. "All I said was shit in the wind. Now I don't call that insulting anybody. If I really wanted –"

The rest of his words were drowned by the officer's shrill whistle as he blew the silver alarm pipe hanging from his tunic, his face crimson with rage. The chain dogs appeared as if from nowhere, four of them led by a sergeant, and all of them armed with carbines. The NCO snapped to attention in front of the officer, the silver crescent plate of his office gleaming in the red ball of the sun which was now beginning to shine through the smoke of the raid. "Sir?" he rapped.

"Arrest those two disgusting animals," the officer spluttered. "Arrest them at once. They have just insulted me – an officer of the Greater General Staff."

The burly chain dog eyed Schulze warily out of the corner of his cold eyes, taking in the chestful of decorations and the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross hanging askew from around his open neck. "What exactly did they say, sir?" he asked.

The staff officer began to explain while Matz laughed uproariously, threatening to fall out of the ancient bath chair more than once. "Shit in the wind, the little one said, Sergeant," the officer concluded, trembling with rage now, "shit in the wind to an officer of the Greater General St–"

It was then that Matz threw the chamberpot full of stale beer at the officer, soaking the front of his elegant tunic.

“Now look what he's done!” the officer screamed, beating off the liquid with his grey leather glove, as if it were concentrated sulphuric acid, "he's

thrown a pot full of piss at me!"

The chain dogs crowded in on the two SS men. Schulze raised the wooden leg protectively. The big sergeant unslung his carbine. Another chain dog clicked off his safety threateningly. "You'd better come quietly," the sergeant commanded. He took a step forward, big hand outstretched to grab Schulze.

But that wasn't to be. With a sudden squeal of brakes a big black Horch came skidding to a halt on the wet cobbles. Huge black-uniformed SS adjutants, every man of them a head taller than Schulze, sprang from the running boards and faced outwards grease-guns at the ready. The sergeant dropped his hand. All around him his men stiffened to attention as they recognised the stiff metal standard flying from the Horch's bonnet.

"Christ on a crutch," Schulze breathed, as the back door of the big car opened fora portly man with a sallow face and a pair of schoolmaster's pince-nez, his black general's tunic devoid of any decoration save the bronze Sport Medal, third class, "It's the Reichsheini himself!"

"What is the matter here?" inquired the most feared man in Europe. "Why are you brawling with my SS men in the middle of Berlin?" Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler's dark eyes filled with a genuine look of concern. "And both of them wounded too!"

"*Garnisonverwendungsfahigheimaten,*" Schulze took time to spit each part of the word out. He detested what it implied. Him and Matzi only fit for home duties! “But they can't make us fit for front line duties a moment too soon, Reichsführer. We're ready to go back to the front as soon as possible." He attempted to click to attention, but drunk as he was, he nearly fell over.

Himmler's eyes sparkled warmly. "That's what I like to hear from my loyal SS men."

“But Reichsführer," the staff officer tried to protest. Himmler withered him with an icy glance. The staff officer's horse seemed to be as frightened by the look as his master and fidgeted restlessly. Reichsführer SS Himmler tut-tutted impatiently. Then his eyes fell on Gerdi's red panties which adorned Matz's shaven skull. “But why are you wearing what appears to be a – er – female undergarment on your head?" he asked.

Matz, suddenly aware of the fix they were in and not wishing to be sent to the feared Torgau Military Prison from which he had volunteered for the SS, lied glibly. "It's because of the blood, Reichsführer."

"Blood?"

"Yes sir. You see it's nearly a month ago since I was wounded, but it still keeps bleeding. The bone-mend– er – the doctors can't seem to stop it. So when my comrade here pushes me out for my morning walk in the fresh air, I wear the garment so that the civvies don't see the blood. I feel, Reichsführer, that it would be bad for morale to see a bleeding soldier in the middle of the Reich's capital."

"Laudable, highly laudable," Himmler said thickly and dabbed his suddenly moist eyes – he was a very emotional man in matters which concerned his elite formation. "You base stallions who have all the time in the world to go riding when the Reich is in danger from all sides should take an example from my brave, suffering SS men."

"Yessir," gulped the staff officer.

Himmler dismissed him with a wave of his hand then turned to the two SS men again, his sallow face set in a soft smile. "And now, what can I do for you two heroes?"

Schulze jumped at the opportunity. Even in his drunken stupor, he knew it was the chance he had been looking for these last few days: a means of escaping the white clinical boredom of La Charité. "Reichsführer, we would like to return to our battalion at once."

"Name?"

"SS Battalion Wotan," Schulze bellowed, as if he were back on the parade ground at Sennestadt.

Himmler smiled fondly. "Ah, Wotan," he exclaimed, "I have heard very good things about your battalion."

Nevertheless Schulze thought he noticed a furtive look of hesitation in the Reichsführer's eyes, as he beckoned Schulze to come a little closer. "Your unit is at Dieppe, Sergeant," he said softly.

"Dieppe, Reichsführer?"

"On the French coast," Himmler explained.

"But there's no front there, Reichsführer," Schulze said, puzzled. "And there hasn't been ever since the Frogs surrendered two years ago. Wotan is the Führer's Fire Brigade, we're always where the action is."

Heinrich Himmler winked, an unusual gesture in such a humourless man. "Don't worry, my brave Sergeant," he murmured confidentially, "the Tommies will be taking care of that problem soon."

CHAPTER 3

The British Prime Minister wallowed in the bubble bath. "Well Mountbatten," he demanded, "what news of the operation?"

The handsome young aristocratic head of Combined Operations seized his opportunity. New to his important job since the sinking of HMS Kelly, his command that had been sunk off Crete, had left him without a command, he wanted to make instant success of it, as he had done with everything else in his meteoric wartime career. "I'm afraid, Prime Minister, that the Boche seem to be on to something. Our friends of the Resistance inform us that the Boche are moving in elements of a new panzer division into the area and two units of the Adolf Hitler Bodyguard have been spotted in the Rouen area. They were badly hit in Russia according to our Intelligence and are reforming at the moment. Then yesterday evening we picked this up from Radio Paris: Roosevelt has given Hopkins, that Roosevelt fellow's special advisor, and US Army chief Marshall full power to provide Great Britain with all the help she might need to try a second Narvik, short of sending American troops of course. Churchill should be warned that in attempting a second Narvik, he risks a second Dunkirk." Mountbatten looked up. "It might mean they're guessing we're going to have another crack at Norway." He shrugged slightly. "Or it could mean, Prime Minister, that, they knew we're really heading for France."

Churchill did not speak. His face remained expressionless, almost as if he had been expecting the news. Mountbatten licked his lips and waited for the Prime Minister to speak. But Churchill remained obstinately silent.

In the end, Mountbatten spoke himself. "Of course, the Boche might simply be doing a little bit of inspired guesswork, Prime Minister. Though we must take into account the fact the op has been on since April, and Field Security has clear proof that the Canadians have been talking about it openly in their pubs on the South-East coast." He smiled thinly, showing his excellent teeth. "Our Colonials are a somewhat loud-mouthed bunch, I'm afraid."

Churchill sat up suddenly. He dipped the end of his cigar into the big jigger of brandy conveniently located at the edge of the bath and stared belligerently at the youthful Head of Combined Operations. Mountbatten told

himself that the PM looked like the Chinese God of Plenty with a severe case of bellyache. "You know why we are putting this op of yours in, don't you, Mountbatten?" he demanded suddenly.

"Well, sir, we haven't done anything since the big Nazaire raid in March, and to use your own words, 'the hand of steel, which comes from the sea, and plucks the German sentries from their posts' has been rather idle of late." He grinned disarmingly.

Churchill glared back. "It's more than a raid, Mountbatten, much more!" he growled, pointing his big cigar at the sailor. "The Reds are kicking up a devil of a fuss about their losses and how they are bearing the brunt of the fighting. Only last week 'Uncle Joe' Stalin stated publicly that the Red Army has no desire to exterminate the German nation, nor destroy the German state. A perfectly clear indication that the Red bugger is prepared to make a separate peace with Hitler if the situation in Russia gets any worse. Naturally President Roosevelt is worried, that's why he is forcing that new chap of his in Grosvenor Square, General Eisenstein –"

"Eisenhower, General Eisenhower!"

"Yes, some sort of un-English name like that. Well, he's now busy, at Roosevelt's request, drawing up plans for an invasion this year. Second Front Now, you've seen the Communist signs painted everywhere on the walls between here at Chequers and London?"

Mountbatten nodded. Overnight there had been a sudden rash of the signs sprawled in glaring white paint on every available wall. They were obviously the work of the British CP.

"But who will bear the brunt of that invasion, Mountbatten?" Churchill thrust out his pugnacious chin and stared accusingly at the naval officer. "The British Army. Mountbatten, I would not be doing my duty to my Monarch if I let a new British Army be slaughtered in France. It has taken us two years since Dunkirk to train those ten new divisions and I'm not going to have them thrown into a great battle for which they are not properly prepared, and faced by a German superiority of two and a half divisions to one in France. The British Army will not suffer another defeat on the beaches of France in 1942.

"But my ally demands a landing in Europe this year. There is no way round it, Mountbatten. I have given my word to Roosevelt that they – he and that monster Stalin – will have it. Oh, yes they will get their landing in France in 1942!" He blew a smoke ring slowly into the air above the big bath and said softly. "Mountbatten, I want a sacrifice from your commandos and the

Canadians who will go in with them."

"A sacrifice?"

Churchill looked at him carefully through half closed eyes. "Mountbatten, I knew your father. He was able and ambitious like you. But he lacked one thing – political savoir faire. And it was that which ruined him. He was unable to see the way things were going in time and ally himself to a powerful political figure. It ruined his career."

Mountbatten remained silent, knowing that Churchill was right. His father's German name of Battenberg, which had roused the ire of the hysterical anti-German mob at the start of World War One, had been only part of the reason why he had been forced to resign from the Royal Navy. Papa had also found himself completely isolated politically when the mob had demanded he should go. His father's ruin had been an object lesson for him throughout his naval career and now that war seemed to be opening up hitherto undreamed-of possibilities for him, he was beginning to realise that he would also need powerful friends at court when the time came for him to make the next jump upwards.

"I know you will not make the same mistake as your father."

"I hope not, sir," Mountbatten replied, vaguely uneasy at the direction the conversation was taking.

"Good, then we understand each other. As I say then, my American ally must have his landing so that he is prepared to take over the task of placating the Russian bear. But Mountbatten, that landing must show our American ally just how bloody and wasteful of human life an undertaking of that kind is. Roosevelt must be convinced that a second front this summer is absolutely out of the question. My boy, the future of the British Empire might well depend upon the outcome of this operation. If the British Army were to be destroyed this summer, we would never be capable of producing another one –the barrel is about scraped clean and you can imagine what our fate would be in the years to come? For remember, God is always on the side of the big battalions."

"But, sir, you can't expect me to send in –"

Churchill cut him short with an imperious wave of his hand. "Mountbatten, understand this. Failure at Dieppe is what I *demand* of you."

CHAPTER 4

"Morning, soldiers!" yelled Colonel Geier above the roar of the waves hitting the base of the French cliffs upon which SS Battalion Wotan now stood rigidly to attention.

"Morning, Colonel!" eight hundred hoarse young throats roared back, sending the seagulls sailing away in alarm into the hard blue summer sky above the sea.

"Stand the men at ease please, Sergeant-Major."

Sergeant-Major Metzger wheeled on his heel. He took up his position in the centre of the hollow square, boots wide apart, chest and jaw thrust out, beefy butcher's hands on his hips. It was a pose he had once seen in an old film about the Kaiser's Army and he had practised it secretly in front of the full-length mirror in his married quarter until he had it perfect. He savoured the moment, running his eyes along the Battalion's rigid ranks. But not one of the men, new recruits as well as the old hands who had survived the Russian carnage, gave him cause for complaint. Every single man was standing woodenly to attention in the prescribed position, eyes fixed hypnotically on the distant horizon. "Shitehawks," he told himself, "yer'd think the dummies were trying to see to England."

"Stand at ease – stand easy," he bellowed and set the gulls sailing off into the sky again. Eight hundred right feet shot out at the regulation angle. Eight hundred sets of eyes came back to life and eight hundred men breathed normally once more. In the rear rank someone farted. Metzger flushed. He took the fart as a deliberate insult to himself, as he did everything that went wrong on parade.

The Vulture stared at the Battalion with his ice-blue eyes and slapped his riding cane against the side of his gleaming boots, which, with his grey breeches and their cowhide inlet, clearly marked him as the Regular Cavalry officer that he had been before he had transferred to the newly established Armed SS in order to obtain more rapid promotion. "Soldiers," he said impatiently in his thin rasping Prussian voice, "Wotan is now back up to full combat strength, thanks to our young comrades of the Hitler Youth." He indicated the 200-strong company of blonde giants temporarily commanded by his second-in-command Major Kuno von Dodenburg. "Every one a former

youth leader, a volunteer and under the legal age for conscription. Seventeen every one of them – a sweet age, in my opinion." The Vulture smiled thinly and stroked the monstrous abomination of a nose which with his surname had given him his nickname of Vulture.

Metzger, who knew his CO's little aberration, sniffed and muttered, "I bet it is for him, the lousy warm brother." But the big Sergeant-Major was very careful to keep his opinion low.

"We are now in France," the Vulture said unnecessarily, "and perhaps some of you older soldiers think that this will be an opportunity for you to laze, amuse yourself with the ladies of easy virtue in Rouen, fill your skins with beer every night. In general, live like gods in France, as the saying goes." The Vulture's thin mouth snapped open, as if it were worked by steel springs. "If some of you think like that, then you will be sadly wrong." He pointed his riding whip challengingly at them. "Oh yes you will. All of you, old soldiers and new recruits, are here to train and train again for the task that will soon face you. And do you know why I shall train you so hard for an early death, for die you certainly will," he paused a moment and searched their faces for any sign of weakness or fear. But there was none, for the eight hundred men facing him were the elite of the elite.

The Vulture answered his own question. "Because you belong to SS Assault Battalion Wotan and in the manner of your death you cannot bring dishonour to Wotan. For when you are long forgotten, your idle bones mouldering under some French clod, this Battalion will be remembered. Do you understand that, soldiers?"

"We understand, Colonel," the great cry from eight hundred fervent throats came back in a tremendous roar, as if the elite of National Socialist Germany were impatient to die.

"Good, very good," said the Vulture and then without warning cried. "Down!"

The Battalion dropped on to the still wet grass as one and lay there rigid.

For a moment the Vulture was silent. There was no sound save the crash of the waves, as he let the chill wetness penetrate their thin summer uniforms and soak into their young hard bodies. "Do you feel it, soldiers – the icy cold of death creeping into your brittle bones. Do you?"

"We do, Colonel!" they yelled in unison, not raising their helmeted heads from the wet turf.

"Then savour it, soldiers. For that final, eternal rest will be the only one you will ever enjoy while you are with Wotan... Now on your feet!" Like the automatons they were, the young SS sprang to their feet, automatically assuming the wooden position of attention, their eyes fixed hypnotically again on the far horizon.

The Vulture swung round. "Sarnt-Major!"

"Sir!"

"Take them away! Training must commence at once. Do you hear," the Vulture's voice rose hysterically, "*at once!*"

"Sir!"

Major Kuno von Dodenburg, the tall blond aristocratic second-in-command of Wotan, sighed with relief as the Vulture disappeared at his usual rapid pace, then turned to face his new command. For a moment he stared at their innocent yet hard faces and felt a warm surge of pride that National Socialist Germany could still produce such men in the third year of the war. Since 1939 he had seen three drafts pass through Wotan's ranks to disappear for ever into the bloody maws of the terrible war machine. But in all that time he had never seen a group of young men like these. Everyone a Nordic giant, a Hitler Youth leader, who had served the Führer unquestioningly since he was ten years old. Truly an elite of the elite.

Now Reichsführer Himmler was going to realise a long-time dream with these seventeen-year-old volunteers. In due course he would form a whole division of such men, dedicated totally to the Firer, with not a soldier in it, save the senior commanders, over the age of 21. These men now facing him would one day form the cadre of the First SS Battalion of the new Hitler Youth Division; and Kuno von Dodenburg knew he could not completely consign such highly valuable human material to Metzger's unthinking brutality or the Vulture's cold-blooded cynicism. That was why he had asked the CO to let him take over the company temporarily while they were in training.

"Soldiers, comrades," he began a little awkwardly. "I welcome you to the First Company of SS Assault Battalion Wotan."

"Thank you, Major!" they chanted in throaty appreciation.

"You have just heard the Colonel's words. He is a remarkable soldier: the victor of Fort Eben Emael and the crossing of the River Bug. But you should not always take him so seriously. He is given to – er – an extravagant turn of phrase." He smiled gently at the young men.

They smiled back, relieved to know that the Vulture's promise that they would all die was not to be taken so seriously after all, immediately liking the handsome young officer with the quiet face, clad in a black leather jacket decorated only at the throat by the gleaming Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross.

"Your purpose here," von Dodenburg said, raising his voice, "is to be trained not how to die, but how to live! And that is why I am going to take a special interest in this company over the next few weeks. Every man of you is a future officer or NCO. As leaders you will have to be ten times tougher than the men under your command. That is why Number One Company is going to perform ten times better than the other three companies. Do you understand, comrades?"

"We understand Major!"

"Good. One last thing. Your training will be hard, very hard, but fair. If any one of you thinks otherwise, he can talk to me at any time – day or night." He swung round to a waiting Sergeant Metzger. "All right, Metzger, take them over the Battalion Assault Course – twice!"

It was the moment that Metzger, or the Butcher as the volunteers of the First Company would soon be calling him, had been waiting for. His little piglike eyes gleamed evilly. Ever since the volunteers had arrived at the camp on the cliffs, he had hated them – "a lot of shitty soft boy scouts in short pants," he had called them privately to his drinking cronies of the Sergeants' Mess. Now he would make them sweat blood. "At your command, Major!" he bellowed at the top of his tremendous voice.

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Wotan's Assault Course was three kilometres of hell dreamed up by all the drill sergeants who had ever lived and some devotee of the Marquis de Sade. A fifty metre crawl up a sheer slope under knee-high barbed wire, with the permanently flowing hosepipes turning the slope into a sea of slippery mud; a great wall of planks ten metres high which ripped the nails off any trainee who didn't make its top the first time; "Smoky Sepp's", a dark cavern of a wooden hut filled all the time with choking tear gas, to be entered at the base and left through the hole in the roof; a breath-catching plunge into a chest-deep stream with the instructors tossing thunderflashes in either side of the gasping, straining, crimson-faced trainees; a never-ending kilometre dash across rugged country with thirty kilos of equipment on the back, ending only

when one threw one's leathern-lunged, pain-racked body into the damp grass to fire ten rounds of rapid fire into moving targets.

Even after all of this the Butcher had no mercy on them. As they lay there in the wet grass, face downwards gasping frantically for breath, he towered above them and cried cynically, "Three kilometres in thirty minutes, gentlemen of the Hitler Youth! What do you think Wotan is – a rest-home for fucking gentlewomen? Too much five against one, I'll be bound." He made his meaning clear with an obscene movement of his right hand. "But by the great whore of Buxtehude, I'll soon stop that kind of piggery! I'll make men of you bunch of slack-assed boy scouts yet. All right you bunch of rooting sows – on yer feet!"

Swaying as if they would collapse, the volunteers crawled to their feet, eyes blank and unseeing, crimson faces running with sweat, huge pearls of perspiration gleaming in their eyebrows.

The Butcher posed in front of them, hands contemptuously on big hips. "Volunteers," he declared, "I've shit 'em! But I've given my solemn promise to Major von Dodenberg that I'll try to make soldiers out of you. I know it's tempting the fates to try. No one in his right mind would think it shitting possible. But the Butcher's got a good heart. All right!" he screamed with sudden fury, the veins standing out at his throat, his ugly face flushing, "At the double! This time we're gonna to do it in" – he pressed the key of his stop-watch – "in fifteen!"

The volunteers staggered like dying men towards the muddy slope.

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Major von Dodenburg stood on a sandy hillock, the sea wind ripping at his clothes. "Comrades," he lectured the volunteers, already burned a brick-red by the wind and the July sun, "at ten o'clock and two o'clock, you will see two heights." The volunteers turned to follow the direction of his outstretched hand.

"On those two heights, small parties of British commandos have established themselves. The commandos are tough, stubborn men who will not surrender. They will fight to the end. How do you deal with them? You winkle them out at the end of the bayonet. The British cannot stand the cold steel. But," he raised his forefinger warningly. "They are armed with their standard automatic rifle, accurate at four hundred metres. You wouldn't make

it standing up. But still they have to be eradicated. After all the CO will be awarded a fresh piece of tin if you do and that is reason enough, isn't it?" He smiled thinly.

But there was no answering smile from the volunteers. Already the brutalisation process was beginning to have its effect. Their faces remained hard, set in the expression of would-be killers, intent solely on learning their chosen profession to perfection.

"So what do you do? You crawl!" His voice hardened, yet somehow inside he was saddened by what he was having to do to these young innocents in order to turn them into soldiers. "And to make completely sure that you keep your fool heads down, Sergeants Metzger and Lansch will begin firing from the heights when I give the signal. At exactly fifty centimetres above the ground. So keep your turnips down." He swung round and waved his hands above his helmeted head. Metzger and Lansch waved back; they were ready. "All right," von Dodenburg commanded, "down!"

They dropped in unison into the parched, yellow grass. Hastily von Dodenburg checked the line of young men. Satisfied, he barked: "Begin crawling – now!"

At the same moment, the two NCOs opened up with their MGs. A vicious stream of red and white tracer hissed above the helmeted heads of the young men crawling desperately through the dusty grass towards the heights. Von Dodenburg breathed a sigh of relief. Everything was running smoothly. Two hundred metres, one hundred metres. In a moment the soldiers would be in the dead ground below the MGs. Then as they had been trained they would rise to their feet, bayonets gleaming in the July sun and race towards the Spandaus to finish off their crews with the cold steel of which the Tommies (as was universally known) were so afraid.

Fifty metres! The frantically crawling young men were alinost there now. One of the volunteers miscalculated. With a hoarse cry of rage, bayonet gripped in his dirty hands, he sprang to his feet. It was the last move he was ever to make.

Neither Metzger or Lansch hesitated. The vicious red stream of crossfire caught the volunteer in mid-stride. He faltered and screamed shrilly as the slugs ripped his stomach apart.

"Shitty greenback," said Metzger as he spat drily into the dust at the dead boy's feet.

CHAPTER 5

Thus as July 1942 drew to an end Number One Company became the cold-blooded killers that Himmler needed for his new division. Their days were full of burning sun and tearing sea winds, hoarse bellowed commands and unrelieved strain which had them gasping from lungs that sounded like broken bellows, limbs trembling, days broken only by hastily swallowed meals of disgustingly greasy, cold "Old Man", reputedly made from the bodies of dead pensioners.

Their nights were little different. It was rare that Metzger and his sadistic NCOs allowed them to sleep more than a couple of hours in a stretch. Thunderflashes tossed through the open windows of their wooden barracks exploded frighteningly under their three-storey high bunks or the sudden alarming chatter of an MG 42, breaking the stillness of the French night, would indicate the commencement of another new scheme to torture their young bodies.

"Right! Hands off yer cocks and on with yer socks!" the NCOs would scream deafeningly, hammering at the doors with their canes. "Out of those wanking pits and off with those silken nighties!"

Furiously they would spring, still dazed with sleep, from their beds, tear off their thick woollen nightshirts and stand nakedly at rigid attention. Lips curled contemptuously the NCOs would parade the length of their ranks, barking at them to "suck in those morbid guts", and "sock back that turnip, soldier, till it hurts", and making malicious comments about their lack of manhood, pointing their canes derisively at the embarrassed boys, then bellowing: "Masquerade – we're going dancing, lovely boys! At the double."

Masquerade entailed changing into fatigues complete with full equipment, before stripping naked at full speed and scrambling furiously into number one uniform, complete with SS dagger and walking out cap. That completed, they would go "dancing" – hopping up and down the length of the barracks completely naked, absurd and crimson-faced with embarrassment, while the NCOs chivvied them on all sides, striking their bare rumps with canes, crying in voices thickened by years of cheap booze and even cheaper cigars, "Come on, you bunch of warm wet-tails, get the lead out of your lovely asses! Cos if yer don't, I'll be forced to get out the vaseline in a

minute! Move it!" And they would guffaw coarsely.

And more often than not the Vulture, lurking in the shadows outside, would let his suddenly hot eyes feast on their handsome, naked young bodies spread out so appealingly, remembering other places and other young men – the soft, shaven, perfumed flesh of those pliant youngsters with the lisping voices and plucked eyebrows he used to meet in the electric darkness of Berlin's Kudamm.

The ruthless training began to pay dividends. Lean as the volunteers had been at the beginning of their initiation into Wotan's training methods, now they were almost skeletal, their eyes luminous in faces that had been hollowed out into death's heads. They were capable of going all day without food or water, carrying out the murderous training exercises in the lonely coastal countryside as if they had always been used to marching fifty kilometres in five hours with sixty pounds of equipment on their backs.

Major von Dodenburg's pride and confidence in them grew daily. Now, as the mess buzzed with strange rumours of imminent action for the Battalion, and more and more units of the battered Adolf Hider Bodyguard Division began to appear in the little villages and hamlets which surrounded Dieppe, he started to give Number One Company the final polish that would make it into a worthy member of the Wotan.

It was during one such company-strength field-firing exercise on the great white cliffs beyond the port of Dieppe, when one of the young aeroplane spotters cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled: "Aircraft to the west! Approaching rapidly!" The company dropped as one, crawling rapidly to any available cover, rifles and MGs already pointing upwards, waiting for the order to fire.

Alarmed, von Dodenburg swung round and focused his binoculars on the dark outline of the strange plane. For a moment he couldn't identify it. Then it sprang into focus within the gleaming circle of glass and he spotted the black and white cross of the Luftwaffe. It was a Fieseler Storch. He sighed with relief, and lowering his glasses, shouted: "All right, men, you can get up, it's one of ours."

The volunteers rose slowly to their feet, dusting the knees of their fatigues, eyeing the black-painted plane curiously as it came lower, savouring the few moments of respite from the gruelling exercise. Von Dodenburg allowed them the break. He, too, was interested in the Storch. For it was obvious, as the pilot circled for a second time at a height of two hundred

metres, that he was looking for a place to land.

Finally he lowered his flaps and came zooming in at 150 kilometres an hour to touch down in a perfect three-point landing a hundred metres away. Von Dodenburg stuffed his glasses into their case and hurried across the field towards the plane.

The door opened and a big, broad, well-remembered face beamed out at him on a massive frame that filled the opening. "Has Sergeant Schulze permission to speak to the Gentleman-Major?" the ex-docker asked cheekily, addressing von Dodenburg in the manner once used by NCOs speaking to officers in the Old Army. Behind him someone tried to push past him and he jerked his elbow backwards in irritation. "Get on my back, you crippled little monkey-turd! Can't you hear him talking to the CO?"

"Schulze," von Dodenburg exclaimed, pushing back his helmet from his sweating brow in surprise, "what in three devils' name are you doing here?"

"Courtesy of the Reichsheini, sir," Schulze explained easily, lowering his eyes modestly. "This is his personal Storch."

"What? Himmler?" von Dodenburg stuttered, "His... his plane?"

"That's right, sir," Matz answered, pushing beneath Schulze's big arm, his wizened face one huge grin, a pile of parcels in his arms. "And we bring gifts to the Company firewater and cancer sticks – for the brave boys of the Wotan. I quote the Reichsheini's own words."

"But you're supposed to be in hospital in Berlin."

Schulze did not reply. Instead he dropped to the grass and reached out a plaster-clad hand to Matz. "All right, you little cripple, come on down." He helped the Corporal to the ground. "All tight," he ordered grandly, poking his big head into the cockpit to the pilot. "You can take her away now, my man. And please convey my respects to the Reichsführer when you return to Berlin. Off you go!"

Von Dodenburg waited till the roar had died away. Then he said: "Well you two rogues, I can't deny I'm glad to see your ugly mugs again. I can use good NCOs in due course. But what the devil am I to do with you for the time being? You're hardly in a fit state for combat at the moment, are you."

Schulze scowled. "Even with no hands, sir, I'm better than that lot of greenbeaks over there. Still got the eggshell behind their spoons by the look of them! Heaven, arse and twine, Matzi, what is the Armed SS coming to? Look at them. I bet that lot of milk-toasts couldn't even get themselves a

piece of nooky in a knocking-shop!"

Von Dodenburg laughed and shook his head, "I don't know Schulze, you're as incorrigible as ever. But what am I going to do with the pair of you?"

He stood the company down and they sprawled out happily on the turf, savouring the hot July sun while von Dodenburg pondered the problem, smoking one of the cancer-sticks sent personally by the Reichsheini.

"You said just a minute ago that they," he indicated the teenage volunteers all around, "that they couldn't even get themselves a piece of nooky in a knocking-shop. By that, I presume you mean they are too innocent to buy themselves a woman of no virtue in a house of ill-fame?"

Schulze looked at Matz. "Did you hear all those big words, Matzi? I think the CO is trying to pull our pissers – ever so gently, but definitely. That's what I think."

Von Dodenburg laughed.. "All right, Schulze. Now listen. This weekend we stand down for forty-eight hours on the CO's orders. So what will those milk-toasts, as you call them, do? I'll tell you, Schulze – they'll head for the brothels of Rouen and Dieppe as quickly as their feet will take them, clutching their fifty Francs in their hot sticky hands. They might be young, but they are still very healthy male animals and they've all heard about French women in bed."

"I didn't think they liked girls much," Matz said, taking a quick sip from one of Himmler's presentation flatmen.

The Major ignored him. "So Schulze and Matz, you're the self-confessed experts on all things female."

"I've had me moments," Schulze admitted modestly.

"Good. Then I've got a job for you. From now onwards you're the Company's official VD patrol. You'll check every other ranks' brothel in Dieppe out and put it out-of-bounds to Number One Company if you find a girl in it without her yellow card stamped right up to date by the local French police doctors. I'm not having any of my men going down with disease now." He poked a finger at them. "And I shall make you two personally responsible if we get one single case of VD this week."

"Holy straw sack!" Schulze exclaimed. "What do you say to that Matzi? Look how low you've gone and dragged me now. A shitty pox-cop indeed!"

Five minutes later, however, he had recovered sufficiently from the

shock of his new assignment to ask Major von Dodenburg a question that took the smile off his handsome young face and replaced it with a look of taut foreboding. "But sir, what in hell's name is the Battalion doing in this Godforsaken Frog hole? That's what I would like to know – why are we in Dieppe?"

"Well, Schulze," von Dodenburg replied slowly. "I'd like to know the answer to that question myself."

CHAPTER 6

“Meine Herren,” announced General Hase, the Commander of the 15th Army, formally, "his Excellency, Field Marshal von Rundstedt!"

The assembled officers of the First SS Division under the command of the barrel-chested Divisional Commander, ex-tank sergeant and Munich Party bully boy Sepp Dietrich, snapped to attention. For even the officers of the SS's premier division who normally had little respect for the field-greys of the Wehrmacht, admired the planning genius of Germany's foremost soldier.

An incredibly old and wrinkled officer appeared through the door of the operations room, huddled, despite the July heat, in a thick greatcoat with a fur-trimmed collar.

Weakly von Rundstedt raised his baton to acknowledge their greeting. "You may be seated, gentlemen," he said slowly, in a voice made hoarse by the French cognac to which he was addicted. The dignified old man who commanded Germany's destiny in the West waited patiently until the assembled officers had taken their places, then he tottered slowly over to the great map that covered one wall of the ops room.

"Gentlemen of the Bodyguard Division," he began, "we can expect the Tommies to attempt a major landing in the Dieppe area in the next week or so." There was an excited buzz of chatter and von Rundstedt smiled thinly, pleased with the effect of his words. "We have it on good authority from our V-men – our agents – in Southern England that the Tommies are massing troops for the attack. In the Führer's opinion, Churchill is being forced into making the attempt by pressure from the Bolsheviks and the Americans." He coughed throatily. The bemedalled chief aide, who knew the signal well, hurried across the room with the unlabelled bottle. "Your cough medicine, your Excellency," he said, and poured out a generous measure.

"Thank you, Heinz. I must have caught a cold on the way here." He took a deep drink of the cognac, while von Dodenburg threw the Vulture a significant glance.

But the CO's cold blue eyes were fixed on the ancient Field Marshal, tensed for his next words, obviously hoping that Wotan would be involved in whatever action would come so that he might achieve an even higher rank,

his sole ambition in life.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," von Rundstedt continued, ignoring the knowing smirk on Sepp Dietrich's broad face. He tapped the big map. "Dieppe, the Tommies' target. Now I am sure that the gentlemen of the SS can guess what the Tommies will attempt to do when they land." The ancient Field Marshal paused, as if daring any one of the black-clad officers present to take the initiative. But Sepp Dietrich, loud-mouthed and as aggressive as he usually was, dared not do that in the presence of Germany's foremost strategist.

"No," Rundstedt queried softly, a cynical expression in his faded eyes. "Then I shall tell you. The Tommies are notoriously wooden and unoriginal in their strategy and tactics. It comes from their rigid class structure no doubt. They tell me that their Army, as amateur as it is, still drills as it did in the days of the Great Frederick of Prussia." He allowed himself a faint smile. "No matter. It makes them easier meat for us, I suppose. So, what will, they do? As you know Dieppe lies in the two kilometre-wide gap at the mouth of River D'Arques. At both ends of that gap there are the formidable headlines, here and here, which dominate the whole area of Dieppe beach – the obvious landing site for our thick-headed Tommies. And of course the Tommies will land there because they will think the old squareheads, as they call us, will not be foolish enough to make a frontal attack on a beach which is so obviously defensible."

Von Dodenburg stared, open-mouthed. The ancient Field Marshal made his statements with the certainty of a clairvoyant.

"Now what dangers face our Tommy friends apart from the fortified promenade at Dieppe? The twin batteries here and here. The Goebbels Battery at Berneval, named after our beloved Ministry of Propaganda Josef Goebbels, and the Hess Battery here at Vesterival-sur-mer. Called after someone who shall remain nameless."

Dietrich flushed, while the Field Marshal smiled innocently at him. The Battery was, of course, named after the traitor Rudolf Hess who had betrayed the Führer and the Party by flying to England months before. As usual the Field Marshal was trying to needle the Armed SS, a formation which he passionately hated. Sepp Dietrich swore he'd pay the old senile bastard back one day. Apparently oblivious to his embarrassment, von Rundstedt continued, "Now these two batteries have specific tasks, as you probably know, if the Tommies land. At the command Sperrfeuer Dieppe, the six 15cm

guns of Hess will lay a barrage down in front of Dieppe. at a range of eight thousand metres, firing an initial six rounds per gun. Goebbels in the meantime would concentrate on any naval forces further out to sea. So what will the Tommies try to do? They will attempt to knock out those two batteries before they attack in force. What do we conclude from that, gentlemen of the SS? We conclude, that an attack on the two batteries will be the signal for an all out enemy landing within – say – the next hour. Do you follow me?"

The SS officers in their immaculate black uniforms squirmed in embarrassment in their seats; the venerable Field Marshal was treating them like a bunch of school kids, instead of combat-experienced leaders of the premier SS division. Awkwardly they mumbled that they had understood.

"Good, good, gentlemen," von Rundstedt's face cracked into a wintery smile. "The Tommies will attack Hess, which is one kilometre inland, by one of two possible beaches – here – near Quiberville and – here – directly in front of the Battery, where there are two gullies, a fault in the cliff." He shrugged. "It could be that they will use both beaches. The Tommy generals have little understanding of the principle of concentration in war. No matter. East of Dieppe at Berneval, which comes into the Bodyguard's divisional area, the Tommies similarly have two small beaches available for their assault on Goebbels. Now," von Rundstedt raised his voice, "I am prepared to lose Hess. Indeed, I have ordered the commander of the Tenth Panzer Division not to make any great defence of the Battery."

There was a little gasp of surprise from the SS officers. Von Rundstedt beamed; it was the reaction he had expected from the SS with its stupid policy of never giving up ground, even if by doing so they could achieve great tactical advantage. "Yes," he said, reaching out a claw of a hand flecked with a mass of liver spots. "Like a spider tempting a fly, I want to draw them into my web. I and the Führer want them to land. To land in force and be slaughtered in their thousands. It will be a tremendous boast for our prestige here in France and it might even force the Ivans to sue for peace when they see that the Western Allies cannot help them. But I cannot afford to lose Goebbels. The poison dwarf," he used the Army's contemptuous name for the dub-footed, bitter-tongued Minister of Propaganda, "must remain firmly in German hands. Naturally the Tommies will use their Navy to cover the landings, and those warships will be the only really effective artillery that the Tommies will be able to bring to bear on our positions. Indeed their fire could

effectively seal off Dieppe and prevent our reinforcements from moving into the place once the Tommies have landed. So we can afford to lose Hess. We want them to land. But we cannot afford to lose Goebbels, because its guns will destroy any attempt by the Royal Navy to stop us slaughtering those troops once they have landed. Now this is where the Bodyguard comes in, gentlemen."

"Your Excellency." Sepp Dietrich sprang to his big feet, barrel-chest thrown out proudly, deft-chin pushed forward aggressively and bellowed, "Beg to report, Field Marshal, that the Field Marshal can depend upon the Bodyguard to the death!"

Von Rundstedt did not speak while he studied the ex-Party bullyboy as if he were a particularly interesting form of beetle that had just crawled out of the woodwork. "What a pleasant thought," he breathed at last, as if the thought of the SS, the "black scum", as he called them privately, lying dead on Dieppe cliffs gave him some pleasure. "To the death."

Sepp Dietrich flushed and dropped back into his seat.

Von Rundstedt looked down at him. "General, at present your division is composed of what we used to call in the Imperial Army – Christmas Tree soldiers." There was an angry murmur from the SS officers, but Von Rundstedt swept on. "Due to your losses in Russia, your ranks have been filled out by too many raw recruits who have never been in action. I admit they will die bravely if called upon to do so. But if I may be so bold as to lecture the gentlemen of the SS – wars are won by live soldiers, not dead ones. Besides, any large scale move by the Bodyguard might well alarm the Tommies on the day, might frighten them off before the trap has closed upon them." He licked his colourless lips, as if he were considering whether he should cough and alert the attentive Heinz with the cognac. "However, one of your battalions, General Dietrich, I have been informed, is up to full strength and relatively well trained. It is also located, tactically speaking, in an ideal spot at Braquemont between the Goebbels Battery and Dieppe. It's your First Battalion – the Wotan."

The Vulture started when he heard the name of his battalion, but unlike Dietrich, he knew this Field Marshal von Rundstedt. Casually he rose to his feet, thrust his monocle in his right eye, and barked in his rasping Prussian voice, "Your Excellency, one cold fart from my kitchen bulls would suffice to blow the Tommies right back across the Channel."

Von Rundstedt smiled carefully. He recognised the coarseness of the

Regular Army cavalryman and knew instinctively he was speaking to his own kind. "You are very confident, Colonel."

The Vulture did not rise to the compliment. Instead, he snapped, "Your orders for my Battalion, Your Excellency?"

Again von Rundstedt smiled, showing his large, too-white false teeth. He liked the bandy-legged little SS Colonel with his baggy breeches and monstrous beak of a nose. "It is not customary for a Field Marshal of the German Army to direct the activities of a single battalion, Colonel, although in these days of change who knows to what depths a German Field Marshal might have to sink."

The Vulture shared the Field Marshal's smile, while two seats away Sepp Dietrich glowered with suppressed anger. "In this case, however, it is vital to the success of the whole operation that the Goebbels Battery should be held. You, my dear Colonel, will remain at Braquemont until the Tommies actually start landing at the beaches next to the Goebbels."

"Then, Your Excellency?"

"Then you will march your battalion down the road to the Battery as if the devil himself were after you!"

"March?" the Vulture queried.

"Yes, march. I am not going to risk your vehicles attracting the unwelcome attention of the RAF which undoubtedly will be over the battlefield at the time, and being knocked out before you ever reach the Battery. You fellows who have been fighting in Russia over this last year simply do not realise the might of the RAF. Fat Hermann, that gross Marshal of the German Air Force, is powerless against them. Hence, my dear Colonel, your men will leave their armour behind at Braquemont and march to battle when the time comes. From this day onwards you will practise marching those five kilometres to the Battery as if your very life depends upon it." He raised his hand and stared down at the Vulture, his eyes icy.

Von Dodenburg looked at the wrinkled old man and shivered involuntarily. The words were not a warning; they were a naked threat.

CHAPTER 7

"May I address you, Sergeant?" the young SS soldier, with the anxious eyes and fringe of white-blond hair which kept falling over his forehead, shouted at Schulze above the blare of the bal musette music that rocked Dieppe's Café de la belle Alliance.

"Why not?" Schulze said generously, eyeing the floor crowded with giggling drunken whores, happy, sweating soldiers and men of the Kriegsmarine.

"Are you familiar with this place?" the boy shouted.

"I am," Schulze answered, not taking his eyes off the floor, watching intently for any man from the First Company, "it's Rosi-Rosi's knocking shop."

"Good. That's why I'm here."

Both Matz and Schulze swung round as one and stared at him. "Are you in the First Company?" Matz demanded, fully conscious of von Dodenburg's threat to have them sent back to la Charité and Sister Klara if one single man of his Hitler Youth volunteers caught a dose.

The boy shook his blond head. "No, the Third."

They breathed out a sigh of relief. "Then that's all right. Go on, soldier, what do you want?"

"A woman," the boy answered boldly.

"You've come to the right place, lad," Matz said, "Rosi-Rosi is right on target if you want to get rid of your dirty water."

The boy flushed with embarrassment. "I know, Corporal. But you see I want a special woman."

Schulze looked at him curiously. "What do you fancy – one with two of 'em? Or with it tucked in neatly under her armpit?" He grinned suddenly at the thought. Matzi, imagine what it would be like if they had 'em there? Yer wouldn't even have to take yer dice-beakers off to get a bit." He made an obscene gesture with his elbow to illustrate what he meant.

"I can't get mine off as it is," the, boy said, "after today's five kilometres in fifteen minutes. My feet are like raw meat."

"Tough tittie," Matz said unfeelingly. "But get on with it, lad, what kind of special piece do you want?"

"Well, it's hard to explain – but she's got to be nice as well as screwable. I mean I'd like to be able to talk to her."

"Afterwards?" Matz queried.

"Yes, afterwards of course," the boy agreed.

Schulze shook his head. "Jesus H. Christ, Matzi," he exclaimed, "what's the Army coming to! This wet-tail here wants to talk to a piece. Great crap on the Christmas Tree, you don't pay 'em to talk, lad, you pay 'em to lie on their backs with their pearly gates open!"

"Give him a chance, Schulze," Matz protested. "He's a nice boy. He probably drinks his sweat with his little pinkie stuck out like this."

"I'd like somebody I could live with a bit while we're in France," the boy persisted.

"What about my old woman?" Matz volunteered with a scowl. "You can have her, if you like – and I'll throw in twenty marks."

The boy smiled. "No, she's got to be French."

"Hey," Schulze snapped. The big frizzy-haired brunette behind the bar swung round.

"What you want?" she called in her fluent, ungrammatical German.

"You, Rosi-Rosi."

She put down the glass she was cleaning. "I come, Sergeant Schulze," she answered.

"Yeah, you might," Matz chortled, "but Sergeant Schulze don't!"

"Currant-crapper!" Schulze cursed, but only half-heartedly; his attention was directed on the brunette brothel-owner, who had gained her nickname Rosi-Rosi from the rouged nipples of her huge breasts which had a habit of popping out of her low-cut silk dress at odd, moments. "Shit on the shingle," he breathed admiringly, "I'd like to get my choppers into them. And look at that ass on her, Matzi – like a ten dollar mare!"

Rosi-Rosi stopped in front of their table, the tops of her breasts trembling like jellies. "Yes," she demanded, "what you got in mind, Sergeant?"

"It's not in my mind," Schulze leered up at her, it's in my britches."

"Then keep the filthy thing there," Rosi-Rosi said without rancour.

"Come?"

"If only he could!" Matz exclaimed.

Schulze ignored him. "It's this lad here, Rosi-Rosi. He's just had an unhappy love affair."

"Yes?" Rosi-Rosi leaned forward curiously, giving Schulze a panoramic view of her magnificent breasts and their rouged nipples.

"Sure. He broke his right hand!" Schulze laughed out loud at his own humour.

"Sale con!" the Madame cursed in her own language, but there was a twinkle in her bright blue eyes all the same. Nor did she object when Schulze put his plastered paw experimentally on her dimpled plump knee.

"But seriously, Rosi-Rosi, this lad here has decided to give up the old five against one and take up with girls – you know, boys in skirts? But she's got to be different – she's got to be someone he can talk to." He winked hugely. "He's a bit funny that way."

"Germans," Rosi-Rosi sighed. She swung round, her breasts quivering. "Jo-Jo," she said to the cross-eyed bartender with a Galoise glued to his bottom lip. "He wants a fanny he can talk to."

Jo-Jo nodded. He dived into the heaving, sweating throng and emerged a moment later with a fat girl with a moon face who looked like two sacks of potatoes tied together by the belt that disappeared into the soft pillow of her massive stomach.

"Jeanne," Rosi-Rosi announced and stroked the enormous girl's hair which looked as if it had been cropped by a cross-eyed barber.

"Christ," Schulze exclaimed, "Jeanne *d'Arc!*" But the boy seemed well enough satisfied. A few moments later he was deep in an excited conversation with the girl, replete with many hand gestures and "*oui-ouis*".

Schulze turned his attention to Rosi-Rosi. "You and me could make beautiful music together, *cherie,*" he said, putting his big hand around her well-corsetted waist and drawing her massive bosom close to his face.

"Watch it, Schulze," Matz said urgently, "she'll poke yer tight eye out with her tit if you're not careful."

"You want jig-jig?" Rosi-Rosi said, seemingly oblivious to Schulze's big plastered paw already fumbling beneath her skirt.

"Want it?" Schulze exclaimed energetically. "If I had to get up now, Rosi-Rosi, there wouldn't be a glass left on this table, and I'm not shitting you!"

Rosi-Rosi laughed and her breasts quivered delightfully. Schulze grew bolder. He thrust his paw right up between her legs. Rosi-Rosi jumped. "It is very hard – and hot!"

"It's not the only thing either," Schulze said darkly. Now if you and me

could only –"

But Schulze was not fated to enjoy Rosi-Rosi's delectable charms that night. For suddenly the thick big felt blackout curtain which covered the café's door was flung back to admit the massive frame of the Butcher and a group of his cronies, all flushed and obviously deep in their cups. He spotted Schulze and the woman at once and bawled drunkenly so that everyone could hear: "Get yer paws off 'n him, Rosi-Rosi! That particular fart-cannon, masquerading as an NCO, is First Company's pox-cop. You never know what yer can catch from even touching him." He opened his big arms in welcome. "Come on over to Pappa, where you're nice and snug and safe."

Rosi-Rosi released herself from Schulze's grip and pushed her way through the laughing throng towards the big Sergeant-Major, who clutched her round the waist and staggered off with her to the nearest table, which he cleared by the simple expedient of kicking the nearest soldier over the back of his chair.

"Perverted banana-sucker!" Schulze growled morosely. "If I only had his missus under me tonight, I'd give her a right old rattle for that, I would!"

"Rank hath its privileges," Matz said in sympathy. "And besides you've got to admit – there's plenty of other talent around."

"Hm," Schulze grunted and sank into a sullen silence, glowering at the whores in their thin flowered dresses, and the sweating servicemen, their big knes jammed deep into the women's crotches as they swept round in the tango.

But Schulze wasn't allowed to wallow for long in his despair or his unspoken plans for taking some terrible revenge on the Butcher.

"Hey Schulze," Matz broke into his reverie, "there's one of ours and look at that pig he's dancing with. If anybody's got a full house, she has."

Schulze looked at the First Company soldier tangoing with a whore who could have been his mother, her long tongue stuck in his ear with professional concupiscence, breathing hard with pretended passion. Her chin was covered with red sores.

"Well, come on, you sewer stomach. Don't sit there like a spare prick at a wedding. That wet-tail's probably got stiff of the ear already the way she's got her spotty tongue stuck in it." The two of them shoved back their chairs and barged their way through the crowd, bowling protesting soldiers and whores to both sides.

Schulze dropped his big hand on the whore's thin shoulder. "Yer yellow

card," he demanded.

"Piss off!" she said, still dancing.

"Hey sergeant," protested the soldier, "don't give me a hard time. I'm only here for the dancing. The way they marched us to the Goebbels yesterday, I haven't even got the strength to get it up."

But Schulze was still in a bad mood. "The CO said I've got to check their shitty yellow cards to see that they don't start spreading any little Frenchie souvenirs around once they take off their drawers. All right, cherie, let's have the card."

"Piss off!" the whore repeated over her shoulder. She pressed her belly deeper into the soldier's. "Come on, shuffle 'em, soldier."

"I'm not telling you another time –" Schulze began, just as a fat Obermaat of the Navy bumped into his back and nearly knocked him off his feet. He spun round angrily. "Are you blind, you perverted naval banana-sucker?" he cried.

"What yer standing in the middle of the shitty floor for then?" snarled the Obermaat. "Stupid SS sod – got to be told to come in out of the rain, some of 'em!"

"You're looking for a knuckle-sandwich," Schulze said threateningly, bringing up his plastered fist.

The Obermaat relinquished his hold on his partner. "You talking to me, soldier?"

"Who do you think – the shitting Big Lion of the Submarine Service himself?"

"Admiral Doenitz, to you, you nasty poisonous garden.. dwarf."

Schulze flushed. "You're gonna get a mouthful of knuckles if you're not careful, you fat fart-cannon!"

"Hey, what gives here?" Rosi-Rosi burst through the circle around the little group. "We're here for jig-jig, not for box-box."

"I told him," protested the First Company boy earnestly, "that I only want to dance with the whore. After yesterday's march to Berneval."

Matz jabbed his elbow into the boy's stomach and his words ended in a sudden gasp as he doubled up. At the same moment the fat Obermaat launched a tremendous punch at Schulze. The big NCO ducked just in time. Unable to stop, the Obermaat staggered into Rosi-Rosi. Caught by surprise, she shrieked with such force that her red-tipped breasts popped out of the confines of her silken dress.

But even that tremendous display of naked flesh could not stop the fight spreading with spectacular speed. Bottles flew through the air. Glasses crunched underfoot. Here and there whores crawled under overturned tables. The three-man band faded away with one last gasp of a dying accordion.

A beer mug hit Schulze on the back of his big head. He staggered forward dizzily. Through the bloody haze he caught a glimpse of the Butcher's ugly face grinning at him.

"Serves you shitting well right;" the Sergeant-Major growled and shoved him back into the fighting, screaming, howling throng with the toe of his boot.

"Arsehole!" Schulze growled, then shaking his head like a bull brushing away a swarm of tormenting flies, went to work on the sailors all around.

From outside there came the howl of a military police truck. "The chain dogs!" Matz gasped, grabbing Schulze's arm.

"Let me go! I'll slaughter the bastards, every single one of the currant crappers!"

"Come on," Matz cried desperately. "You don't want to go back to the Charité do you, you stupid horned-ox? This way – through the window of the piss corner." Swiftly the two of them carved a path through the brawling mob and disappeared into the latrine, one second before the military police rushed in through the door, their rubber dubs at the ready.

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Thirty minutes later the MPs had dragged the last struggling servicemen out and the Lieutenant in charge had signed the chit which Jo-Jo had handed him, to certify that the German Town Commandant would be responsible for all damage caused by the brawlers. Now Rosi-Rosi stood there in the empty café, surveying the wreckage and massaging her left breast, as if she were kneading bread. But her mind was not on the mess of broken furniture and smashed bottles. It was on the two boys' strange words. Why had both of them complained about their feet? And what were the Wotan Boche doing marching to Goebbels – the battery located at Berneval – when they had plenty of transport? It might mean something and then again it might mean nothing. Still one couldn't be too careful. In the end she made up her mind. "Jo-Jo," she called.

"Yes, Rosi-Rosi," her small lover replied, the cigarette still stuck to his thick wet bottom lip.

"That Boche Sergeant-Major wants to stick his meat into me in thirty minutes at his quarters."

Jo-jo nodded, bored. "So?"

"I haven't got time. You'll have to go, Jo-Jo."

"Where?"

"To see the Englishman. I want you to tell him this..."

CHAPTER 8

"Cor ferk a duck," Colonel, the Laird of Abernockie and Dearth groaned in pure Cockney and tugged at his over-long kilt to keep the keen sea wind from blowing it up. "It's parity about the goolies in these sodding things, Freddy!"

Major the Hon Freddy Rory-Brick, known behind his back to the men of Number Seven Commando as Red Prick, took his gaze off the green, swaying mass of the Channel, "Well, you don't weally need to wear one, sir." Languidly he screwed his monocle tighter in his eye and looked down at the tiny, red-haired figure of his CO in his tam o'shanter and drooping Abernockie kilt. "Do you, now?"

"What do you mean, you long streak of Scots Guard piss! I'm the laird, ain't I. The lads expect it from me. Besides, Freddy, when yer a CO like me you have to keep up with the Joneses. If Lovat of the Fourth Commando can wear civvie bags and have his personal piper, and Jock Churchill of the Third can go into action with that great ruddy sword of his, I've got to have this bleeding tweed skirt." He swept his hands across the great white V of the Eureka landing craft speeding towards the chalk cliffs. "My gillies and gamekeepers like me to keep up the old traditions. They're just as toffee-nosed as you are, Freddy."

"Toffee-nosed, sir!" the Scots Guard Major exclaimed. “Really, Colonel, you do use the most extwaordinary ex-pwessions!”

The Laird gave the other man one of the sly grins which had gained him the nickname of "Foxy Fergus" in the days when he had been a barrow boy in the Tottenham Court Road before, to his complete surprise, a long forgotten great uncle, the Laird of Abernockie and Dearth, had died and he had been informed he owned "half o' ruddy northern Scotland". "All right, Freddy," he said. "Screw in that window-pane firmly, and finger out. Here they come! Start timing 'em."

As the first Eureka crunched into the shingle one hundred feet below, the big Major pressed down the catch of his stopwatch. The last rehearsal had begun.

The ramp slapped the wet pebbles. Swiftly, expertly, the men of Number 7 Commando doubled to left and right, pelting up the beach towards

the base of the cliffs. They dropped simultaneously, Tommy guns at the ready, forming a defensive screen round the two rocket launchers.

"Stand back, Freddy!" the Laird rapped, not a moment too soon. There was a soft belch as the men below fired the grapnel launchers. Two swift puffs of white smoke. From their centres two great gleaming grapnels burst into the open, heading for the top of the cliff. Behind them snaked a wildly quivering 100-foot length of stout rope. The first hook hit the chalk metallicaly. A second later the other grapnel gripped fast.

"Two minutes, sir," Freddy announced.

“Sodding spot on!” the Laird exclaimed, feeling his blood already beginning to run faster with a sense of rising excitement.

Two burly sergeants grasped the ropes. Without a second's hesitation they started to scramble upwards, while a Tommy-gunner sprayed the top of the cliff with blank ammunition. Another pair of commandos grasped the rope. Now more and more Eurekas were hitting the beach. The air seemed full of flying grapnels.

"Bash on, lads!" the Laird cried, his kilt flying up about his spindly shanks unnoticed now.

The first crimson faces appeared above the edge of the cliff. "Five minutes," rapped Freddy.

Eyes wild and staring, chests heaving with the effort, the commandos unslung their weapons. Crouched low, they dashed for the first line of apron wire. On the heights above Southsea's Home Guard, the enemy opened fire with blank slugs.

A corporal flung himself at the wire at full-tilt, arms outstretched. He screamed shrilly as the wire bit into his body. But already the second man was running up his impaled body and dropping over the other side. More and more of the commandos followed him across the human bridge.

"That's it, lads!" the Laird screamed. "Give 'em sodding hell! Mix it!" His eyes gleamed excitedly; the weeks of remorseless training were paying off.

"Eight minutes!" Freddy cried.

His comrades hauled the bloody human bridge across the wire. Now they broke up into little groups of four and five, each under the command of an officer or NCO. Swiftly they doubled to their allotted positions facing the seven simulated MG pits which they knew from Intelligence surrounded the Battery.

The Laird raised his Very pistol.

"Ten minutes," Freddy announced, even his voice excited now. The Laird pressed the trigger. Once. Twice. The two bright red flares hushed into the English sky. It was the signal. In perfect unison, the commandos opened up with their automatics. The morning was full of the crazy chatter of blanks. Training Mills bombs sailed through the air like black rain. In the same instant, one man dashed forward from each group, zig-zagging violently like rugby internationals going in for a try, firing from the hip as they did so.

"Here come the Wangers!" Freddy cried.

The MG posts taken, the handful of US Rangers attached to the Commando doubled forward through the gap in the line, lugging their ten-foot-long Bangalore torpedoes with them.

"Come on, Yanks. Move them all-American legs of yourn!" the Laird screamed excitedly.

Expertly the Americans slithered through the grass in one wild dive and thrust their Bangalores beneath the triple line of apron wire directly in front of the wooden mock-up of the Battery. For a moment nothing happened. Then there was a violet flash of cordite and wire flew everywhere.

"Twelve minutes, sir!"

The smoke was split by scarlet muzzle flashes. Gradually the firing began to die away. The rapid snap and crackle of small arms became the odd dry crack. Abruptly a green flare sailed out of the smoke and hung there in the sky, tingeing everything below it an eerie, sickly hue.

"The signal!" the Laird exclaimed excitedly. "How long Freddy? Well, come on, old cock – how long?"

Freddy pressed the stop. "Exactly sixteen minutes and wather more than thirty seconds!"

The Laird of Abernockie and Dearth beamed up at the tall elegant guardsman. "Ain't yer window pane steamed up with excitement, Freddy?" he cried. "We did it – right on time!"

"Yes, it was weally wather impwessive, sir." The Laird, now in high good humour, gave him a soft raspberry.

***

The Laird had just finished inspecting his men still sprawled out on the cropped turf, chests heaving, sweat-glazed faces crimson, when the DR

roared in from the main Southsea–Havant road. At sixty he bumped across the uneven ground, scattering the elderly Home Guards, bouncing up and down in his saddle.

“Bet his knackers hurt tonight, Freddy!" the Laird said, watching his exhibitionist progress with interest.

"Wonder what's the hurry, sir?"

"Search me. Perhaps Winnie wants me to make me maiden speech in 'Ouse."

With an impressive screech of protesting rubber, the leather-jerkined DR braked. He thrust up his goggles and snapped to attention when he recognised the strange little officer's badges-of-rank. "Colonel, the Laird of –"

"All right, put a plug in it, mate," interrupted the CO of the Commandos, "we don't want to be all day. What yer got for me, son?"

A little bewildered by the Cockney accent coming from what was supposedly a Scottish lord, the DR opened his pouch and took out a sealed buff envelope. "Your eyes only, sir. From Combined Ops HQ," he barked.

"Don't rupture yersen," the Laird said sourly. Taking the envelope, he walked to one side and taking the skean dhu from his sock, slit it open. He read it slowly, as if he were having difficulty in understanding its contents, his grey face growing grimmer by the second.

A few yards away the Home Guards were jingling their mess tins hopefully, for a "pint of real sergeant-major's tea". Freddy knew it was his responsibility. But the look on his CO's face told him that it was not the right time to order a tea-break.

"Anything the matter, sir?" he asked finally.

"Come over her, Freddy," the Laird replied.

"Sir."

"Freddy, I can't let you read this dispatch. It's from Richmond Terrace – Intelligence – and for my peepers only. But I'll be buggered if they can stop me telling you roughly what's in it."

"Sir?"

The Laird lowered his voice. "Freddy, Intelligence reports that a Jerry battalion is practising speed marches up the road to Berneval," he announced gloomily.

"So?"

"So, you big streak of piss, doesn't it tie in with the ruddy fact that it's

exactly thirty-nine days since we abandoned the first Dieppe raid Operation Butter, and that since then every sodding pub from Pompey to Plymouth has been full of squaddies and matelots spilling their guts to anybody who'd buy 'em a pint? You can bet yer bottom dollar that the Jerries have got on to us." He stared gloomily out at the heaving green, white-capped sea. "Freddy, I think the Jerries know we're coming."

The Guardsman stared down at him aghast. In spite of his ludicrous lower class accent and even more ludicrous attempt to ape an upper class Scottish lord, Freddy knew that Fergus MacDonald was no fool. Since he'd formed his own Commando from his tenants and a handful of volunteers from the Glasgow slums in early 1941, the Colonel had learned faster than many a professional officer. He had done well at Vaagso and even better at St Nazaire, winning the MC at the first and the DSO at the second. The CO's long crafty nose that had once given him his nickname of Foxy Fergus could smell trouble a mile away, and where many a professional officer simply bashed on and took his knocks, the CO preferred to "use the back door", as he was fond of explaining at training sessions.

"I don't know. I can't put me finger on it, as the actress said to the bishop," the Laird said sombrely. "All the same, I can feel it in my bones – they know!"

"Pon my soul," Freddy exclaimed. "But sir, they wouldn't let us walk into a twap, would they?"

The CO didn't answer. Instead he said, "Freddy, you take charge here."

"What?"

"Yes, I'm off." He swung round and shouted at the DR. "Hey, you."

"Sir?"

"Bring that bike of yours over here at the double!" The DR thrust down his goggles and rumbled the heavy motorbike across the rough ground towards him. The Colonel flung his leg over the pillion, carelessly revealing that in true Scots fashion, he wasn't wearing underpants. "All right, let her rip!"

"Yessir!" The bike roared into noisy life. The diminutive Colonel took a firmer grip of the DR's waist and tensed expectantly.

"But where are you orff to, sir?" the Hon Freddy Rory-Brick demanded, his celebrated calm vanished for once.

"To the Big Smoke," yelled the Laird of Abernockie and Dearth, the wind snatching at his words as the bike tore away, "I'm gonnna have a word

with his Lordship..."

"Oh, *Chwist!*" Freddy cursed and clutched his forehead.

CHAPTER 9

The Commando Colonel was not the only officer concerned that day. As midday approached on that Sunday, 16th August 1942, Colonel Geier and Major von Dodenberg cantered together down the straight road from Braquemont to Berneval on their hired horses. To any watching peasant preparing to dig into his Sunday rabbit, they looked like a score of other Boche officers they had seen riding down the same road on Sunday afternoons these last two years – immaculate, lordly, aloof, part of a world that had nothing to do with their own existence.

But the two SS officers were not out riding for pleasure; they were on duty. As the Vulture had rasped to von Dodenburg when he had ordered the latter to hire the horses, "Von Rundstedt is a damn clever strategist, von Dodenburg. But the old fart has never heard a shot fired in anger since 1918. He doesn't know that on the battlefield everything doesn't work out so smoothly as one of his big charts in his HQ at St Germain." Thus the two of them cantered easily down the road, their horses' rumps gleaming with sweat, keen eyes searching the countryside on both sides for obstacles, possible sources of trouble, difficulties.

"Assuming the Tommies will land before dawn," the Vulture lectured his younger companion. "I feel the Wotan should have little to fear from air attack."

"Providing we observe strict blackout control, sir," von Dodenburg answered. "But what about their naval bombardment?"

The Vulture frowned. "I think we'll manage to scrape through underneath it. We can assume that the bombardment will hit the rear areas behind the Battery first, trying to cut it off from reinforcements. Then it'll move to the immediate vicinity of the Battery to cover their infantry going in. I think we'll make it before then."

"I'll buy that, sir. But all the same, I don't like this road." He indicated the white gleaming causeway, bordered on both sides by high thick hedges.

"What do you mean?" the Vulture looked suspiciously at him as they began to trot into Belleville-sur-Mer.

"Plenty of cover on both sides. No room for manoeuvre for anybody on the road itself, sir. In other words, sir, a perfect place for an ambush."

"We'll be at the Battery before the Tommies can get this far, von Dodenburg."

"It wasn't the Tommies I was thinking of, sir. I was thinking of the French."

"The French!" the Vulture laughed; it wasn't a very pleasant sound. "My dear Major; the French are an efficiently decadent people and suitably selfish as such people usually are. Unlike the absurd English and Germans who seem to find pleasure in killing each other, the French occupy themselves more realistically with the joys of the flesh. This," he made an obscene gesture, "and this," he slapped his lean stomach with his free hand. "Why should they risk their precious French necks for a bunch of skinny-ribbed, buck-teethed Tommies? No, no, my dear Major, the French have long forgotten the war and got on with the business of living."

"All the same, sir," von Dodenburg began, but stopped suddenly. The Vulture's gaze was directed on the beach which had revealed itself to the right and below them.

Kuno von Dodenburg reined in his horse and stared at the narrow shelving beach covered with heavy shingle. Beyond it rose a sheer white cliff, its only outlet a narrow, steep-sided gully, filled to a depth of two metres with barbed and rabbit wire. The wire was stretched very tight and pinioned to iron stakes driven into the sides of the gully. "It looks very formidable, sir," he ventured.

The Vulture nodded slowly. "Yes, it does. If the Tommies ever got their eggs caught on that, there'd be a few singing tenors about." He jerked the reins. "Let's go and have a look at the Battery."

They trotted on, past a large, lonely white house perched on the edge of the cliff, which looked like an abandoned church. "MG nest," the Vulture observed as they reined their horses once again and took in the Goebbels Battery.

Von Dodenburg knew the details of the Battery by heart now. It had been built by the French in 1936, as part of the coastal defences. After 1940 and the start of the Tommy commando raids, the Wehrmacht had improved it so that its guns had a maximum range of 22,000 metres. Each of its guns was mounted on a thick ferro-concrete platform, revolving on a central pivot, defended against infantry attack by thick wire fences and seven MG posts, each manned by five men under the command of a corporal. To the rear of the guns there were two further MG posts with magnificent fields of fire over

a couple of hundred metres of open country flanked by woodland. The whole place was garrisoned by some two hundred artillerymen.

The Vulture licked his thin lips carefully. "Not bad, not bad at all, von Dodenburg. But mind you the garrison is artillery and you know my feelings about the devotees of their patron, Saint Barbara?"

"No, sir."

The Vulture grinned. "All big heads and big arses. All brains and not much pepper in their pants when it comes to action."

Kuno von Dodenburg smiled. He knew why the Vulture disliked the artillery; their officers, the intellectual cream of the Wehrmacht, got promotion even quicker than the Armed SS, and everything the Vulture did was subordinated to becoming a general as his father had been before him. "All the same, behind those defences they won't need much pepper in their pants on the day, sir," he remarked.

"I suppose not," the Vulture said, stroking his monstrous nose. "All in all, the place looks good. It'll hold until we arrive here when the Tommies land."

"If, sir," von Dodenburg persisted.

"You're still worried about that road?"

"Yessir."

"All right, von Dodenburg what do you suggest I should do about it?"

"Well, sir, I'd feel happier if we had the Battalion's armour standing by to cover us if anything went wrong."

"It won't," the Vulture said.

"If they were alerted at the same time as the infantry, they could reach us within minutes of trouble, the Major persisted.

"The crews are only half trained, you know! They'd probably do more damage to each other than to the enemy in the dark"

"I don't care, sir, I'd feel happier if we had them standing by in case of emergency."

The Vulture looked hard at the younger officer's handsome, serious face. "You know, von Dodenburg, you are going to worry yourself into an early grave."

"Better that than a Tommy bullet, sir," von Dodenburg said, smiling.

"All right, you win. The armour will be alerted. But God only knows what will happen when those greenbeaks get behind the wheels of the Mark IVs."

***

That evening the Laird of Abernockie and Dearth staggered from the DR's motorbike, his face and uniform covered in thick white dust and moved stiffly to the entrance of Combined Ops HQ in Richmond Terrace. Thickly he demanded to be allowed to see Lord Louis Mountbatten.

"But you can't expect to see the Admiral just like that, Colonel," the elegant aide replied horrified. "He's a very busy man, you know."

"Listen, mate," the Commando Colonel snapped, "if I'm not in there talking to his Lordship within the next five minutes I'll have them nifty upper class knackers off yer with my winkle-picker," his hand dropped to the skean dhu tucked into his stocking top, "in no seconds nothing."

The elegant aide hurried away. "It's the Commander of the Seventh Commando, sir," he explained hurriedly to an amused Mountbatten, "and he's in a-devil of a mood. He threatened to – well, it doesn't matter, sir."

Mountbatten laughed. "Old A and D, eh?" he exclaimed. "The 'orror of the 'ighlands! Oh well, let him come, I can let him have five minutes, Jenkins."

The diminutive Colonel in the drooping, dusty kilt got down to business at once. "Admiral, I don't like it – I don't like it one bit!"

"What don't you like, A and D?"

"The whole op – this bloody Operation Jubilee." He leaned forward across the big desk, his shaggy carrot-red hair falling over his forehead. "I think the Jerries have rumbled us."

Mountbatten's handsome face hardened. "Impossible," he said firmly in his best quarterdeck manner.

"Well, what about these SS troops doing speed marches on the road between Braquemont and Berneval, Admiral? Why that particular stretch of road in the whole of France, eh?"

"Coincidence, A and D."

"Get off, Admiral," the Laird of Abernockie and Dearth snorted irreverently. Pull the other leg – it's got bells on it!"

"What do you mean, Colonel?"

"Well, just look at the whole ruddy set-up, Admiral. Jubilee was first scheduled for April 1942. Then there were about fourteen hundred second-grade Jerry soldiers in Dieppe. By July when we had originally planned to

launch Jubilee, there were three divisions in the area, including a sodding SS division."

He looked accusingly at Mountbatten, but the Admiral remained stonily silent.

"All right, what happened then?" the Colonel continued. "The op was cancelled and what did the old Hun do – he withdraws some of the troops." He raised a dirty finger warningly. "But that wasn't the end of it, oh no, Admiral. As soon as the op is on again, the Jerries move back. What's going on over there? Has old von Rundstedt got a yo-yo up his arse, or – do the Jerries know we're coming?" The Laird of Abernockie and Dearth breathed out hard and stopped suddenly. With fingers that trembled slightly with suppressed rage, he lit another of his favourite Woodbines.

Mountbatten hesitated. The comic Colonel was not the first to have protested against Operation Jubilee that week. General Montgomery who had been in charge of the operation originally had written from his new command in the Desert to General Paget, C-in-C Home Forces, "If they want to do something on the Continent, let them chose a target other than Dieppe". It was obvious that a group within the Army was rapidly losing confidence in the whole nasty business; yet Mountbatten knew how desperately Churchill was pushing the op, and his own star was linked to that of the Prime Minister.

"A and D," he began finally, "I think you are concerning yourself unduly about all this." He shrugged. "Couldn't we call them a series of coincidences that mount up to exactly nothing?"

"You might. I don't!" the little Colonel replied bluntly. "I'm responsible for the lives of four hundred men, I can't afford to lark around with coincidences. You of all people should understand. They're my people, I'm their Laird."

Mountbatten would have laughed on any other occasion at the comparison. But at this moment the irate little Colonel presented too much of a danger. He would not feel himself bound by the caste loyalty of the regular officer. He might well just go and blow his fears to some damn reporter on the Daily Mirror, and then there would be the very hell to pay. "Yes, I understand, A and D, but what exactly do you expect me to do? The Op begins on Tuesday night. Too many people and too many things are involved. It is too late to make any drastic alterations to the plan now."

"I don't know about that, Admiral," the Colonel persisted doggedly. "I'm only concerned about my lads. Now, let's just assume that them ruddy

Jerries marching up to Berneval every other day, as Intelligence states, are the ones who are gonna support the Battery when my chaps move in."

Mountbatten opened his mouth to protest, but the Laird was quicker. "Give us a bit o' hush, Admiral and let me finish, will you? Let's assume I'm right. So what happens to my lads when the initial bombardments alerts the Jerries that something is up? I'll tell you," he pointed his finger at the elegant, square-jawed scion of princes. "The Jerries'll catch them with their knickers down, hanging on that ruddy big cliff under the Battery. And it won't be penny buns they'll start throwing at us – it'll be handfuls of shit. Now all I'm asking for me and the lads is that you take care that those SS men don't get to the Battery before we do. We're prepared to take our chance after that, Admiral."

Mountbatten's brain raced and he reacted as quickly as he had ever done on the pre-war polo field. "All right, A and D," he snapped, reaching out for his red-painted scrambler phone, "I'll take care of your SS men. You worry about that damned Battery. Now then would you excuse me, A and D, I've got a lot to do before Tuesday morning."

CHAPTER 10

"Silence in the whorehouse!" Sergeant-Major Metzger bellowed at the top of his tremendous voice. Silence fell on the assembled NCOs of the First SS Assault Battalion Wotan. Slowly the Butcher ran his piglike little eyes around the NCOs' red, gleaming expectant faces, their big hams already curled round the handles of their beer-mugs in anticipation. Satisfied with their appearance, he raised his glass with ceremonial slowness, until it reached the third button of his tunic as was prescribed in the regulations. "Comrades of the NCO Corps," he snapped formally. "It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to our *Kamerad-schaftsabend*. Up the cups, comrades."

The one hundred and fifty NCOs raised their mugs to the level of their third button, slopping beer everywhere.

"I know it's only French gnat's piss," the Butcher bellowed. "But it's gonna be a cold night, *prost!*"

Like automatons, the NCOs guzzled the frothy French beer sucking it down in noisy gulps until their mugs were empty. Then, as the traditional Army ceremony prescribed, they banged the mugs down on the scrubbed wooden tables and rubbed the bases round three times in noisy unison.

The Butcher wiped the foam from his mouth with the back of his hairy hand, his face already beginning to sweat in the August heat. He looked at Schulze. "Sergeant Schulze," he barked, a smirk on his broad face, "you reckon yourself the Battalion comic, tell us a joke."

"And make it a juicy one, Schulze," chuckled Sergeant Gross, who made a habit of chewing razor blades when he was drunk., "I always get stiff when I hear a juicy one, pox-cop."

Schulze, his face angry and glowering, stumbled awkwardly to his feet. He thrust up his plastered paw. "Why don't yer sit on that, Gross," he snorted. "Give yerself a cheap thrill! A joke, Sergeant Major? What about the two nuns practising hymns together in bed?"

"Eh?" the Butcher looked at him blankly.

"Shit," breathed Matz, sitting next to Schulze, "hat bastard's so dumb he can't even eat soup with a spoon."

"Well, what about the one of the plastic surgeon who hanged himself?"

Schulze persisted.

"You call that a shitty joke?" the Butcher growled. "Give us one to make us laugh. We don't want those lemons, you rooting sow. We want something to make us piss our pants!"

Schulze looked up at the ceiling desperately, as if appealing to God to snatch him away from so many fools. "Well, Sergeant Major," he said carefully, trying the joke he had told on these occasions for the last three years, "did you hear what the soldier said to his misses on his first night home after six months away from her?"

"No," the Butcher said eagerly; the French waitresses had almost finished refilling the glasses now.

"Take a good look at the floor, darling, because you're not gonna be seeing anything except the ceiling for the next shitting forty-eight hours!" The room exploded with laughter, while Schulze stared at his comrades' red sweating faces with undisguised disgust.

"Now that's what I call a joke, Schulze!" the Butcher gasped, tears running down his face. He grasped his mug. "All right, comrades, let's sink this one before it gets too cold. *Kameraden – prost!*"

Schulze looked out of the window at the brilliant, sun-drenched square, and hissed through his beer, "Matzi, don't swallow so much o' that parrot pee. Remember we've got better things in front of us." He smiled, remembering the revenge he would be soon taking on Sergeant-Major shitty Metzger, and winked at Matz.

The one-legged NCO winked solemnly back.

***

The same brilliant sunshine that shone down on the barracks of Assault Battalion Wotan that Tuesday afternoon, 18th October 1942, scorched the roads of Southern England too, transforming the long lines of vehicles queuing up outside the ports into stifling boxes. They rumbled past ancient, stub-towered Saxon churches and squeezed through narrow cobbled high streets towards the gleaming green stretch of water below. Here and there grubby children in ragged shirts, making tar horses from matchsticks and the melted tar at the roadside, waved. But their mothers, emaciated, long deprived of their husbands, their hair in iron curlers, stared at the convoys apathetically. They had seen too many men drive down to the ports never to

return during these last black years.

Now the little south coast ports were filled with marching Canadians, their transports left above on the heights overlooking the boats. Essex Scottish Regiment... Fusiliers Mont-Royal... Royal Hamilton Light Infantry... Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada... Five thousand of them, marching through silent streets scrawled with the fading "SECOND FRONT NOW!" slogans, echoing to the stamp of steel-shod ammunition boots.

Nobody waved. Nobody shouted. No bands played. And it was fitting that they didn't. For of the five thousand men crunching over the cobbles, swinging their arms fiercely, sweating in the hot afternoon sun, only two thousand would ever see England again.

***

"Mein Herren," said the Vulture, "I know it is hot, but may I crave your attention?" He looked at the Wotan officers with barely concealed boredom. The Wotan officers, clad in black breeches and their white summer jackets, faced their red-faced CO. "In a moment we shall be going across to the NCOs' Mess to endure yet another of those social evenings which the Reichsheini with his petty-bourgeois weakness for such impossible occasions, has forced upon us." The Vulture looked challengingly at his officers to check whether any of his National Socialist fanatics were prepared to take offence at his remarks about their Supreme Leader. But they feared him, more than they respected Himmler and they remained silent.

Von Dodenburg smiled to himself. The Vulture had really tamed the Battalion's Party hotheads. A mere twelve months ago, he himself would have taken offence at remarks of that kind. But that had been before Russia.

"Now I do not know your capacity for strong waters. All I know is that the gentlemen of the SS NCO Corps will undoubtedly drink themselves into insensibility this evening in their usual piggish fashion. My officers will not do so, however much they are pressed to do by those guzzling swine over there." He waved his riding crop in the direction from which the first and inevitable chorus of *Oh, du schoener Westerwald* was coming. "You will accept a maximum of three schnapps – in the case of you younger lieutenants a sniff at the waitress's apron should suffice – and that is all. The Tommies could land at any moment and I don't want any of you getting your turnips blown off because your brains were too schnapps-addled to react fast

enough." He laughed harshly and fingered his Knight's Cross. "After all, I need you alive so that I can cure my throatache with a few diamonds."

A few of the older officers laughed, but not many. The Vulture was deadly serious. He would sacrifice them all if it would gain him the coveted 'diamonds' for his Knight's Cross.

Kuno von Dodenburg walked out into the brilliant sunshine with his CO and blinked his eyes rapidly. The hot glare cut at his eyeballs like a sharp knife. "Phew," he breathed and wiped away the sweat. "Do you think they'll really come in this heat, sir?"

"They can cool off in the sea when we kick them back into it," the Vulture said, apparently unaffected by the temperature. He levelled his cane at the flat oily-slow swell of the water below. "Ideal for a landing, that sea. For all we know, my dear Major, they may be beyond the horizon at this very moment." He laughed and allowed von Dodenburg to open the door to the NCOs' party.

***

It was now 6.10 p.m. With a soft plop the buoy with its green flag slipped into the calm sea from the leading ship of the Royal Navy's 13th Minesweeping flotilla. The first marker through the German minefield that barred the way of the invasion fleet to follow had been laid. Swiftly the little minesweepers started to surge forward in a tight V to begin clearing the Channel.

Behind them, in the south coast ports, covered by a thick, choking smoke screen, the troopships, disguised all these weeks as merchant ships, began to shed their camouflage. The soldiers began to march up the gangplanks, labelled and numbered like a package. In the galleys the sweating, dirty cooks in their torn undershirts started to hand out the last supper many of the troops would ever eat.

"Sodding hell," Colonel the Laird of Abernockie and Dearth cursed, looking down at the greasy mess at the bottom of his mess-tin, "ruddy soya links and cowboy beans. Trust the Navy to make sure that us brown jobs spill our guts before we ever sodding well get there!"

"Oh, I don't know, sir," Freddy Rory-Brick answered imperturbably, spooning up his beans, "It's weally wather good!"

***

As the officers led by the Vulture entered and the assembled NCOs stamped to their feet, Schulze whispered to the plump, big-breasted waitress Marie, with whom he had been sleeping the last few nights, "Come over here, Juicy."

"Why do you call her Juicy?" Matz queried.

"If you had your dirty big paw where I've got mine just now," Schulze answered, "you'd know why."

"Filthy bugger!" Matz said disgustedly, as Marie giggled with delight.

Schulze had to hurry if he were to carry out his plan successfully this evening. He passed the waitress the phial of liquid he had stolen from the bone-menders that afternoon.

Juicy giggled again when she saw the dark brown bottle. "The boom-boom?" she queried, eyes sparkling.

"Very boom-boom," Schulze said mysteriously. "That stuff should go off like Vesuvius exploding."

Still giggling, the waitress went off, leaving Matz looking at Schulze in bewilderment. "What's all this, Schulze?" he asked, when they had taken their seats again, and the officers with them.

Schulze chuckled with undisguised joy. "It's concentrated brown bomber for the Butcher," he exclaimed.

Matz's mouth fell open. Like everyone else in the Battalion, he feared the tremendously powerful laxative that had been dreamed up by the fiendish Doctor Hackenschmitt, Wotan's new surgeon. "Shit, Schulze, one drop of that stuff makes yer fart like a flamethrower!"

"Exactly, my little crippled friend," Schulze replied calmly, raising his glass in false camaraderie to the Butcher, whose big hand was now gripping the doctored beer. The Butcher let his attention wander from the Vulture's conversation and took a mighty swig.

Schulze nudged Matz in the ribs. Matz spewed a mouthful of beer on to the table. "What yer shittingly well doing?" he gasped, "trying to break me ribs?"

"He's drunk it," Schulze whispered urgently. "The Butcher's drunk it! Now we'll have a few fireworks."

"But what's all this in aid of?" Matz demanded. "What yer giving him the brown bomber for?"

"Cos we want to get out of here without trouble."

"Leave a free piss-up!" Matz exploded.

"There are higher things, Corporal Matz," Schulze said solemnly.

"Tell me one."

"F-A-N-N-Y," Schulze spelled out the word slowly.

Matz's sullen look vanished. "Oh, well, that's something different," he agreed heartily. "I didn't realise we were talking about religion. But where?"

"The *Café de la Belle Alliance*."

"Rosi-Rosi, Schulze! But she's the Butcher's piece. If we buggered off now and he found you in the pit with her later on, he'd have the eggs off'n'yer with a blunt razor-blade."

"My poor simple soldier," Schulze said pityingly, "tonight the Navy's out on an exercise, this lot here are getting pissed and soon Sergeant-Major Metzger will suffer an unfortunate accident which will keep him close to his personal thunderbolt for the rest of the night. So, Matzi, what do you conclude from that?"

"That you'll be able to shove yer meat into Rosi-Rosi and I'll have the pick of her whores." Matz rubbed his hand delightedly. "I might spoil myself tonight with a couple of 'em."

"Come on, let's sneak out, Matz." Carefully the two of them pushed back their chairs and strolled with apparent casualness towards the door.

"Hello, where are you two going?" It was Major von Dodenbuug, a glass of beer, hardly touched, in his hand.

"It's Matz, sir," Schulze rose to the occasion immediately. "He's got a touch of migraine. I think it's the company," he added. "The noise and the rough talk."

Matz looked wan.

"I think I'll get the little feller back to his bunk, and settle him down with Goethe's poems and a cup of weak tea."

Von Dodenburg grinned and pulled down the corner of his right eye. "Can you see any green there, Schulze? Now what are you two –" He stopped as the head of the table was shattered by a tremendous burst of wind that set the glasses rattling. The Vulture's monocle popped out of his eye with surprise. It was only with difficulty that he restrained himself from falling backwards. Seated next to him, Sergeant Gross grabbed his throat frantically, eyes crossed dramatically. "Gas alarm!" he cried as if he were choking. "Gas alarm!"

As the Butcher staggered to his feet, his face a sickly green, his hands clutched to his ominously rumbling stomach, Schulze said hastily, "I think we'd better be going now, sir. And I'd advise you not to stay too long, there are a lot of rough types about!"

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Von Dodenburg watched them stagger down the road towards Dieppe, their bodies shaking uncontrollably. Then he shrugged and dismissed them from his mind. He left the raucous laughter behind him and crunched a path across the fine grey gravel of the parade ground towards the First Company area. Already the night was beginning to slide long black fingers across the ground. Soon it would be time for the men in the barracks to put up the blackouts. He dropped the cheap Dutch cigar that someone had offered him at the NCO's party and ground it out, staring at the youthful, unlined, unspoiled faces of his men, their cheeks tanned and glowing with good health, their gestures quick and assured. Suddenly he felt a warm glow of pride in them. The drunken cries, roars, snatches of dirty songs coming from the NCO's party were forgotten. There was no dirtiness, no corruption here, von Dodenburg told himself. Here there was only dedicated devotion to Folk, Fatherland and Führer. Here was the new Germany, unburdened by the dirty compromises of the past, the clean young men who would run the Reich when the war was won.

Warmed by the thought, Major Kuno von Dodenburg yawned hugely and then turning, began to make his way back to his own quarters. He was suddenly very tired. He would make an early night of it. Tomorrow would be another day.

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They were through the minefield. There was a half moon and the sea was as smooth as glass. But the faint rustle of the wind and the lapping of the waves covered the stir of the ships' screws and the subdued yet precise snap of commands. Everything was running smoothly. Yet there was a taut quality of suspense everywhere. For the CO of the 7th Commando it was as though it were his first raid and the first time he had crept through the undergrowth towards an unsuspecting German sentry. He took another sip of ration whisky

from his silver flask and offered it to Freddy.

"What do you think?" he asked softly, as if on the invisible enemy coast, German soldiers were straining their ears to catch his words.

"The usual balls-up, sir, I wouldn't be supwised."

"The lads okay?"

"Oh, I wouldn't know, sir," Freddy answered easily. "I leave that sort of democwatic stuff to the NCOs."

"Big streak o' piss," the Colonel said severely. "Gimme that flask back, you glutton."

For a moment the two officers were silent as the fleet of 250 little ships started to form up into groups for the final leg of the voyage to the French coast. Freddy Rory-Brick focused the borrowed night glasses and for want of something better to do began to count them aloud. "Five... six... seven... ten... eleven... twelve..."

Suddenly he stopped.

"What's up, Freddy?". the Colonel asked casually, finishing the last of the Scotch.

Freddy hesitated.

"Well come on, pee or get off the pot!"

"It's the gwoups, sir," Freddy answered unhappily.

"What about them?"

"Well." Again he hesitated.

"Oh, come on Freddy, get yer bleeding upper-class finger out, will you! We'll be in sodding France by the time you get it out – the way you're going on."

"It's the number of groups sir." He licked salt-dry lips almost fearfully. "There are thirteen of them."

CHAPTER 11

"Shit on the shingle!" Schulze had exclaimed delightedly, pressing the rouged nipples of her tremendous breasts in his hairy ears. "God, I'm going deaf – I can't hear a fucking thing!"

That had been the last thing he had said before he had passed out, exhausted by too much love-making and drunk with the Marc she had fed him purposefully all the night. Now Rosi-Rosi gently released his big snoring face from between her naked breasts. With surprising agility, she slipped out of the double bed and opened the door to the bedroom.

The café was silent. It had been a quiet night and most of the whores had left early complaining about the lack of business. Now there was no sound except the big German sergeant snoring, and a soft regular squeak higher up where presumably his one-legged companion was still occupied with Claude and Gi-Gi.

"Jo-Jo," the whore called softly. "Are you awake?"

Her diminutive lover appeared from behind the zinc-topped bar. "Is the Boche pig asleep?" he whispered.

She nodded. "Snoring as if he were sawing down a forest."

Jo-Jo yawned and helped himself to a Pernod from the half-empty bottle on the counter. "Good, it's about time for the Englishman to come."

Rosi-Rosi picked up an apron. Jo-Jo grinned sleepily as she bound it round her naked stomach. "What's the matter – do you think the Englishman has never seen one of those hairy things before?"

"*Salaud!*" she cursed calmly and shrugged, her breasts trembling like puddings as she did so: "You never know with the English," she said. "They are a very virginal people." She strode over to the bar and poured herself a glass of beer. She sank it in one gulp and belched contentedly. "Why do you think he wants to see us tonight, Jo-Jo?"

Jo-Jo shrugged his skinny, consumptive's shoulders. "Who knows? He is a man who keeps to himself. They all are." He sipped his Pernod pensively. "You know, Rosi-Rosi," he said, "if I had to choose between the English and the Boche, I'd pick the latter."

"Why?"

"They spend more money. The "milords" were very tight with their

money here in Dieppe before the war." He looked at her massive naked bulk seriously. "The Germans are a very generous people, on the other hand."

Rosi-Rosi put her hand to the base of her stomach. "Well, if they are all like that big bull upstairs, they're generous all right – not only with their money!"

Jo-Jo opened his mouth to reply, but the woman stopped him with a quick gesture of her plump, be-ringed hand. "The bike," she hissed. "It's him!"

They listened tensely to the faint metallic sound of a bicycle being propped up outside, followed a second later by a single tap on the door – the signal. "Open up, Jo-Jo, quick!" Rosi-Rosi commanded and flicked off the light behind the bar.

Rosi-Rosi waited till the man had entered and the door was closed again, before she turned on the light once more.

"I say!" the Englishman exclaimed, his blue eyes dropping on to her naked, berouged breasts.

"Comment?" Rosi-Rosi asked, not understanding his English.

The Special Operations man, a tall, slim captain with quick nervous eyes and a permanent tic in his right cheek, said in his rapid, excellent French. "Nothing. It just slipped out, Madame."

"That's what that Boche pig upstairs kept saying last night," Rosi-Rosi said sourly.

"What?" the SOE Captain looked at her puzzled.

"Nothing. But what do you want to see us for at this time of night?"

For a moment the Englishman overcame his acute nervousness, the result of six months of undercover living, running the Dieppe network, and smiled. "They're coming," he announced proudly.

"Who's coming?" Jo-Jo asked.

"We are – the British! We are attempting a great landing this morning. Out at the points, and here. You will see," he added. "It will be something to tell your grandchildren about."

Rosi-Rosi made an obscene gesture with her upraised middle finger, which gave eloquent testimony to what she thought of history, and cried. "Here! Did you say here?"

“Shh,” hissed the SOE officer. "Yes, when we have taken both batteries we shall land in force on Dieppe Plage. Once they have overcome the Promenade defences, they'll be coming straight up the Marechal Foch and

Verdun. You'll find yourself right in the middle of a battle if you stay, Madame."

"If I stay, sale con," Rosi-Rosi cried furiously. "Where do you think I'm going? I'm not going to sacrifice my property, my beautiful café, for any damned war." Tears of self-pity and anger welled up in her blood-shot eyes. "Why didn't you tell us this when you involved us in your silly damn spy game?"

The SOE Captain looked at her incredulously. "But it's for your country, Madame," he protested. "We are coming to liberate you from the German yoke."

"Stick your liberation up your skinny English arse!" she sobbed through her tears.

"But you must go now. I came here specially to warn you. I have other more important tasks to carry out before this night is finished," the SOE officer said fervently and tried to lay his hand on Rosi-Rosi's naked shoulder.

She shook it off angrily. "Get your paws off me!" she screamed. "Who told you to touch me? You've ruined me, you have, and I've got the best knocking shop in Dieppe."

"Shh," Jo-Jo hissed urgently. "You'll wake the Boche!"

But it was too late. The Boche was already awake, standing stark naked at the top of the stairs, his usually happy face set in stony disbelief. Schulze had not been able to understand very much of the French but what he had been able to understand had sufficed. He knew he was in the presence of a British spy.

He towered above them, a great bull of a man, the reason he had awoke and sought her wilting away rapidly before their startled eyes. Sergeant Schulze had never had any dealings with spies before, and he was at a loss. But he knew he should do something.

The British officer made up his mind for him by moving his hand to the shoulder of his shabby jacket. Schulze was a shade quicker. With a great roar, he launched himself into the air. The SOE officer screamed as Schulze's flying bulk descended upon him. The SOE officer went suddenly stiff as his face twisted at an awkward angle. His neck was broken.

Jo-Jo rushed at Schulze with a knife clasped tightly to his side. Schulze skipped behind a table. Jo-Jo lunged. Schulze brought down his white club of a right hand. Jo-Jo screamed with pain, as Schulze pinned him to the table. "Let go... let go, you're breaking my wrist!"

The shout alarmed a hitherto mesmerized Rosi-Rosi. With a wild cry she sprang on to Schulze's back, and wrapping her plump arms around his neck, dug her heels into his naked ribs as if she were riding a horse.

"Get off," Schulze yelled thickly, as Jo-Jo freed his hand and lunged again. He felt the knife slice his ribs. Desperately he spun round, trying to shake Rosi-Rosi's great bulk off. But she clung to him like an angry limpet. Jo-Jo sucked in a deep breath, his eyes wild. Schulze could see he was coming in for the kill. Frantically he tried to lever Rosi-Rosi's interlocked fingers apart with his clumsy plastered paws.

"Having a bit of a lark?" Matz's cool voice inquired from above them.

Schulze flung a wild glance at the head of the stairs. Matz was poised there, his arms wrapped around the nubile bodies of the naked girls at either side of him. He was smiling encouragingly.

"Move, pigshit!" Shulze gasped fervently. "They're trying to kill me!"

"Naughty, naughty," Matz said and bent down, as if he had all the time in the world. He gave the girls a quick push to both sides. Unstrapping his wooden leg in one swift movement, he hurled it once round his head like a lasso and let go. It hissed through the air. With a solid, fleshly thwack, it caught Jo-Jo in the face. He went flying back over the bar, blood squirting in a thick red stream from his smashed nose, to slam against the wall.

Hopping down the stairs like a naked kangaroo, Matz grabbed at Rosi-Rosi. She freed one heel and aimed a wild blow at her new assailant but missed. "Naughty, naughty," Matz commented again.

She screamed shrilly and slackened her grasp on Schulze's neck. He didn't hesitate. Swinging her round like a sack of potatoes, he heaved suddenly. Rosi-Rosi lost her grip. With a wild cry for help, she dropped to the floor and went slithering across the room to smash against the wall next to her unconscious lover.

"Now what do you call this for a piggery, Schulze?" Matz asked, supporting himself on the table. "Can't leave you alone for a minute and you're off starting orgies or something!" He grinned.

“Button it!” Schulze snapped, in no mood for humour now. “These Frogs are some sort of spies or something.”

Matz's grin vanished. "What do you mean?"

Schulze turned to face a groggy Rosi-Rosi, her hair in complete disorder, her massive breasts dangling loosely to her belly. "Come on, you Frog sow, out with it! What's all this about?"

"Stick yer tongue up yer ass and give yourself a thrill," she cried.

Schulze hauled back his big fist. "Forgive me missus," he cried through gritted teeth. "But you asked for it." He smashed his fist directly into her face.

She gave a high scream of agony, spitting out her front teeth. At the top of the stairs the two whores, ashen-faced with shock, screamed in unison.

Schulze concentrated his angry gaze on the bleeding Rosi-Rosi. "I'm not asking you again – out with it! What's your game here?"

Rosi-Rosi opened her bloody mouth and spat out another tooth. "*Salaud, putain,*" she began to curse him. But as she did so they heard a powerful explosion out to sea which set the glasses quivering violently in their shelves behind the bar and rocked the floor beneath the two SS men's naked feet.

"In three devils' name, what was that," yelled Matz, steadying himself on the shaking table.

"I'll tell you," Schulze cried, as a blood-red light flooded in through the un-blacked-out windows above. "It's the shitting Tommies. They're here!"

"The Wotan," Matz gasped. "They'll need us!"

"You're telling me. Those wet-tails of the First Company are dead ducks without us."

"But what can we do – me with my leg and you with your flippers, Schulze?"

The women were forgotten, as Schulze cast around desperately for a way out. "Here," he cried, "pick up that peg-leg of yours." Hurriedly he laid his plastered paws across the table, while Matz hopped to his leg and seized it firmly with both hands. "Right. Give them a right old bang!"

Matz needed no urging. As the firing grew louder, he brought the booted heel of the wooden leg down across Schulze's outstretched hands.

"By the great whore of Buxtehude, Matzi!" Schulze roared in pain. "You rotten little perverted banana-sucker, you! What are you trying to do – shear my shitty flippers off?"

But his anger vanished when he saw the long cracks running down each dirty plaster cast. Hastily he slapped the casts together. The paster fell away easily to reveal two pale, terribly wrinkled hands.

"Ugh!" Matz exclaimed. "Those flippers of yours look as if you've just dug 'em up from the boneyard!" Schulze groped for his pistol with fingers which felt like thick cold sausages.

"What you do?" Rosi-Rosi cried in alarm, her eyes wide with fear, her

pudgy hands held in front of her great dugs.

With a curse Schulze dropped the pistol on the table. "I was always soft-hearted," he said, beginning to struggle hurriedly into his clothes. "Come on, you little shit," he ordered Matz, as the boom of artillery out to sea grew louder, "strap on that peg-leg of yourn at the double. Wotan's off to the shitty wars again."

BOOK II – THE BATTERY

“War's hell, but peacetime will shitting well kill you!”

Sergeant Schulze to Corporal Matz
18th August 1942

CHAPTER 12

It was nearly dawn. Out at sea angry red lights blinked on the horizon like enormous blast furnaces. Continuous scarlet flashes split the grey haze. The air shook with the silent detonations of shells. Somewhere out in the Channel the naval battle which had alerted the Wotan was gathering ferocity.

But the gasping, sweat-lathered young SS troopers had no eyes for the sea. Their wide, staring gaze was fired straight ahead: on the crazily heaving shoulders of the man in the next rank in front. For the Vulture was setting a cracking pace. They were now within a kilometre of the Goebbels Battery and the bandy-legged little CO knew it was imperative that Wotan reached the guns before the Tommy barrage descended upon the coastal roads.

"Tempo-tempo!" he cried hoarse, as he doubled back down their ranks, slashing at laggards with his riding crop, booting the heavier-set, ashen-faced NCO's, still sick from the night's carousing. "In three devils' name, will you men never move!"

"We're on time sir," von Dodenburg gasped, as the Vulture joined him at the head of the column. "We're making it."

"Of course, we'll make it," the Vulture snapped. "If I have to beat every single one of them into a run. March or croak is Wotan's motto."

Now the dark low silhouette of Belleville began to loom up ahead. Von Dodenburg recalled his former fears about the village and tightened his grip on his machine-pistol slung across his chest. But the village seemed dead, still sunk in its blacked-out, pre-dawn sleep.

"Don't be so damn nervous, von Dodenburg," said the Vulture irritably. "There will be no trouble. As I told you –" He stopped suddenly, for he had heard the unmistakable thug-chug of a French gazogene car approaching from the direction of the village.

The Vulture acted at once. "At the double, von Dodenburg!" he cried. "You two sergeants follow with the MG! Come on, get the lead out of your breeches!" The four men swiftly doubled forward ahead of the column. Now the twin blue crosses of the car's blacked-out lights were visible as it came to meet them. The driver must have spotted them too, for he put his foot down on the accelerator.

The Vulture did not hesitate an instant. "Stop him!" he yelled and

pointed his riding crop, his sole weapon, at the twin crosses.

The leading NCO dropped to his knees, his shoulders tensed. The other giant carrying the heavy load of the MG 42 flung it across the NCO's shoulders. The next moment his comrade pressed the trigger and white tracer hissed low straight down the road. The first burst missed, sailing past the car like white golf balls.

"Hit him you horned-ox," the Vulture cried in exasperation. He brought his cane down across the giant's back. "Or by God, I'll have the eggs off you with a blunt razor-blade."

The giant took more careful aim. He squeezed the trigger. The machine-gun chattered at his shoulder. Hot cartridge cases tumbled noisily to the cobbles. The gazogene skidded to a sudden stop, effectively blocking the road.

"Come on, von Dodenburg," the Vulture ordered. "Let's get the bastard out of the way."

"*Nicht schiessen!*" a voice called from the opaque darkness in near perfect German. "I'm a friend. Friend!"

The two SS officers stopped in mid-stride, as the hatless figure staggered towards them from the car, blood trickling down the side of his head. The Vulture switched on the little torch attached to his jacket. In its blue beam they caught a glimpse of a grey uniform.

"A Milice, sir. He's friendly!" gasped von Dodenburg.

"Yes, Milice," faltered the wounded man as he came level with them. "Lieutenant Gautier, sir."

Von Dodenburg caught a glimpse of a dark, almost Jewish face and wrinkled his nose in disgust at the stink of stale garlic; then he snapped: "What is it, man, why are you holding us up like this?"

"An ambush... an ambush. They're waiting for you on the Rue Principale."

Von Dodenburg looked significantly at the Vulture.

The little Colonel ignored him. "Who is waiting for us – the Tommies?"

"No, sir," the French officer replied, springing to attention as he recognised the Colonel's stars. "My people, sir. Those traitors of the Maquis. They moved into the village an hour ago, they overwhelmed my people in their sleep. It was just good fortune that I –"

The Vulture waved him to silence with his cane. Behind him the Wotan

had halted, the men tensed and nervous in the dark shadows on both sides of the road, yet grateful for a break in that murderous pace. "We have no time for manoeuvre, Gautier. We must pass through Belleville and we've got only minutes in which to do it."

Gautier's dark face lit up. "There is no need for manoeuvre. What do those Maquis gangsters know of tactics? They have barricaded themselves in the houses on both sides of the main road – perhaps some two hundred of them. But their rear is wide open. There are none of them in the parallel road."

The Vulture's cold-blue eyes lit up. "Good, then this is what we will do. Captain Holzman will take in Number Four Company and flank the village on the left. I will attempt a feint along the main road to draw their fire. You, Major von Dodenburg will take One and Two Companies and push up that parallel road. When we are all in position, you will attack their rear and roll them up. I shall then pass through the village at the double and on to the Battery. Is that clear?"

"Clear, sir!" von Dodenburg snapped.

"Clear, Colonel," echoed the swarthy-looking Milice officer. To von Dodenburg, it seemed as if the Frenchman were enjoying the situation.

"This way, Major," whispered the Milice officer.

There was something about the fellow's voice that grated on von Dodenburg, but he knew he had no alternative but to follow. With his two companies spread out in a hasty battle formation, he followed their guide into the narrow back street, bordered upon both sides by ancient tightly shuttered houses which stank of age and manure. To von Dodenburg in the lead, it seemed that the steel-shod boots of his men made a devil of a racket. He prayed that the Maquis had concentrated their efforts on the main road. If Wotan were caught out here in the open, it would be sheer slaughter.

The French Lieutenant seemed to read his thoughts. As the first sections entered the deep shadows, he whispered: "It would be better perhaps, if I went ahead, just in case."

"But –" von Dodenburg began. But the Frenchman did not hear. He was already stealing down the alley silently on his thick crepe soles. Angrily the SS officer slapped the safety catch of his machine-pistol. Nathan Rosenblat, SOE Captain and formerly of Dachau Concentration Camp, his job done, disappeared into the, darkness.

Von Dodenburg hesitated. What was he to do? He shivered suddenly,

although it was warm. Just then the first shutters were flung open at the end of the street, an angry, gruff voice yelled "en avant... *mort aux boches!*" and he knew they had walked into a trap. The thick wedge of a double-barrelled shotgun was thrust out of the window and roared into blue-red life. The lead man of the first section screamed hideously, as he took the full blast in his face.

"Stand fast!" von Dodenburg cried desperately, as the shutters were thrust open on both sides of the street and murderous fire erupted from each window. Everything was blood-soaked chaos. Men dropped to the cobbles. "Stretcher-bearer... stretcher-bearer... they've got me in the guts... Comrades, I'm blinded. Someone help me. I'M BLINDED!" The hysterical cries rose on all sides, as the shouting, sweating men in the windows poured a relentless fire into the SS troopers trapped below.

A great plough horse broke out of a stable. Foam bubbled from its slack lips as it clattered through the carnage, its eyes wild with terror. It struck von Dodenburg standing there in the middle of the bloody alley a glancing blow. He reeled back and fired from the hip. The wild burst caught a grenade-thrower in the chest and nearly sawed him in half. He plummeted from the window and hit the bloody cobbles with a soft thud.

Aghast at the slaughter of his young volunteers from the Hitler Youth, von Dodenburg acted the only way he knew. "Sections one, two and three break into the houses on the left!" he roared above the vicious snap and crackle of small arms fire. "Sections four, five and six – the houses on the right. At the double!"

Frantically the troopers began to batter down the doors with their rifle butts and boots, while their comrades tried to cover them, taking murderous casualties all the time. The first door yielded and a group of panic-stricken youngsters tumbled inside. The survivors of the massacre fought each other for cover, clawing their way in out of that terrible fire over the bodies of their dead and dying comrades. The blinded soldier stumbled down the corpse-littered alley, hands outstretched as he felt his way, sobbing bitterly in blood-red tears from the scarlet pits which had once been his eyes. Von Dodenburg knew he could not leave him. As section after section broke into the houses and began to return the enemy fire, von Dodenburg darted forward, crouched low, firing crazily to both sides. The Maquis concentrated its fire on him. Lead stitched blue sparks on the cobbles on both sides. But he seemed to bear a charmed life. "Over here!" he gasped wildly.

"Where, sir?" the boy called recognising his voice.

"To me!"

Head raised high and at an angle, the boy stumbled through the welter of bodies towards his CO. A Frenchman at one of the windows raised his arm and casually lobbed out a grenade. It landed just in front of the blinded boy.

"*Achtung!*" yelled von Dodenburg.

The boy did not seem to hear. He staggered right into the explosion and it tore him apart. Like a terrible football, his helmeted head rolled towards von Dodenburg, picking its way neatly through the corpses sprawled everywhere, stopping at the Major's feet.

As a horrified von Dodenburg reeled back to the cover of the nearest house and was seized by eager hands, that terrible sightless stare seemed to follow him accusingly, condemning him for leading these young innocents into the murderous trap of Belleville.

CHAPTER 13

All was still silent as the Eurekas of Number 7 Commando formed up behind the lean rakish shape of the steam gunboat that would lead them into their attack on the Goebbels Battery. To the Laird of Abernockie and Dearth, who three days before had forced Lord Louis into having Wotan ambushed and who was now quietly vomiting into his vomit bag in the lead Eureka, it seemed that everything was running to schedule. Up front the gunboat was now steaming forward at a steady nine knots, followed by the white V of the Eurekas, while somewhere out in the opaque darkness of the flanks, two further destroyers were supposedly zig-zagging back and forth to add their firepower if trouble came.

But to a green-faced, hollow-eyed Laird, it was clear that their services wouldn't be needed; despite his earlier fears it was obvious that Jerry was not expecting them. Apart from his usual sea-sickness and a soaked kilt, the crossing had gone absolutely without incident. Now the prospect of getting ashore, whatever might be waiting for them there, was becoming definitely more appealing than the heaving seas.

"I say, sir, there she is – Fwance!" Freddy Rory-Brick raised a languid hand and pointed to the dark smudge of the coast which lay ahead.

The Laird tossed his vomit bag over the HQ Eureka's wooden side, splattering some of its contents on the unfortunate signals sergeant crouched beside him. He looked at the black wall of France, stark, silent and menacing, and felt that quickening of the blood he always experienced when he was about to go into action.

"Must you always be so ruddy la-di-da, Freddy," he snorted, trying to repress his own emotions. "Here we are landing in enemy territory and all you can say is, 'I say, there she is Fwance.' Ain't you got no feelings?"

"Never weally thought about it much, sir."

"I don't know, Freddy," the Laird sighed and tried to wring some of the seawater out of his bedraggled kilt, "what have I done to deserve a big toff twit like you?"

Freddy grinned lazily. "Spect I have some good points, sir."

The minutes passed leadenly. Beside them in the Eureka the eighteen commandos started to give their weapons a last check. The sergeant signaller

poised over his set. At the blunt bow, the smooth-faced, eighteen-year-old sub-lieutenant skipper prepared to release the gate which would start them on their mad dash up the cliff once the Eureka had hit the beach. The Laird gave his men a quick survey and was pleased with what he saw: his gillies and petty gangsters from the Gorbals looked tough and ready. They wouldn't let him down.

"What time is it, Freddy?"

"Nearly four, sir."

"Good, thirty minutes to go."

Now there was no sound save the steady throb-throb of the Eureka's motors and the slap of the green water on their blunt prow. Thoughtfully, the little Commando leader began to strop his skean dhu on the palm of one hand. But he could not quite conceal the nervous tic in his right cheek. Freddy Rory-Brick noted it and told himself the CO was working himself up to his usual berserk battle-rage; some poor Hun was going to suffer this dawn.

It was zero four-fifteen. They could see the dark mass of the coast quite clearly. Here and there a commando nudged his pal and indicated the stark outline of the lone house on the cliff-top which they recognised from their training. Everything was silent. France was still asleep.

The Laird thrust his dagger into the top of his stocking again and picked up his rifle. "All right, me lucky lads," he exclaimed cheerfully. "The trip round the pier's over. Stand by!" He looked at the pale-faced sub. "Snotty, when yon gunboat breaks to the right, I want –"

The star shell exploded directly in front of the little convoy with frightening suddenness. A silver spurt of light and then it climbed high into the sky to hang there, bathing everything below in its icy colour.

"Jerries!" the sergeant signaller gasped. "Over there to the left!"

The two officers swung round and saw the German E-boats were coming in for the attack at forty knots, their multiple cannon chattering frantically. Ahead the gunboat opened fire. The E-boats increased speed.

"Torpedo!" the Laird cried.

"And another!" Freddy added as another wild flurry of bubbles rose from the water.

Desperately the gunboat tried to avoid the deadly fish, but the first one struck it amidships. It reeled as if punched by a gigantic fist. Scarlet flame leapt a hundred feet in the air. The gunboat came to a halt, ominously listing

to one side. But still her guns continued to fire. As if in command to a secret signal, the E-boats roared round in a huge white arc, cannon chattering again. 20mm shells hissed flatly over the surface of the water, dragging a burning fiery-red tail behind them.

The first Eureka reeled under the cannon fire. Splinters of wood sliced the air and thick white smoke gushed from its shattered engine. Tiny blue flames licked greedily at the wooden stern, as the craft trembled to a halt in the churning sea. The E-boats circled the stricken Eureka like a pack of timber wolves.

"Oh, my poor lads!" the Laird groaned. "Where are them bloody destroyers? It's slaughter!"

"Yes," Freddy agreed as calm as ever. "I fear they've really got us by the short and curlies!" He picked up his rifle and began to fire coolly at the nearest E-boat.

"Bugger that for a lark!" the Laird reared, suddenly in command of himself again. "Hey, you snotty," he yelled at the ashen-faced sub-lieutenant. "Don't stand there like a spare prick at a wedding. Get on to that steering. Zig-zag for the coast!" He spun round. "Signaller. Hand signal if you can by this light."

"Sir, I'll try," answered the sergeant, springing to his feet as the first tracer started to, wing its way towards them.

"Signal-scatter and make smoke! It's every man for himself now!"

Bracing himself against the wildly swaying deck the sergeant tried to signal. But it was already too late. The E-boats were well within their formation, churning up and down their ranks in great bursts of water, shooting up craft after craft. The sergeant screamed and reeled backwards, clutching his face. A burning, shell fragment had struck him squarely in the nose and ripped a hole in it.

The Laird lowered him gently. "Don't worry, Jock, it'll be all right." But the man was already dead. "Freddy!" yelled the Laird above the chatter of the enemy cannon and the ear-splitting howl of the E-boats, "for Chris-sake, make smoke – we haven't got a chance otherwise!"

Freddy moved with surprising speed. He sprang to the launcher attached to the bow. Tracer hissed through the air all around him, but he managed to grab the trigger of the first launcher and pull hard. A long cannister sailed into the air. The smoke cannisters tumbled into the sea, stark black against the ruddy glare of the blazing Eurekas. The young skipper

desperately twisted and turned the wheel and headed for the cover. Two more Eurekas followed him. Angrily one of the German E-boats roared after them to finish them off, cannon chattering furiously. But just short of the sudden bank of smoke, it swung round and slowed down, rearing up in the water like a spirited horse.

The Laird breathed out a sigh of relief. "The bugger daren't come in here in case he collides with one of us," he cried to his men. "I think we've –"

"Look out, sir," a soldier cried. "Torpedo firing!"

The Laird swung round to see the E-boat lurching as the two-ton fish shot from its sharp bows. The sub-lieutenant swung the Eureka round wildly just in time. The deadly weapon hissed past them, trailing a series of popping bubbles behind it.

"Hurrah!" a cry of heart-felt relief rose spontaneously from the commandos' throats as it flashed by. But froze the next instant on their lips as the torpedo struck the Eureka ahead of them. The HQ commandos ducked as the hot blast slapped their own craft from side to side as if it were a paper boat on a pond. The roar seemed to go for ever. The Laird, crouched like the rest, felt his ears must burst soon. He struggled to breathe, his nostrils full of the acrid smell.

And then it was over. The Laird thrust his head cautiously over the side. The other Eureka had vanished and there was nothing there to reveal that it had ever existed save the booted foot bobbing up and down on the circle of water that marked its passing.

As the smoke enclosed them and the roar and snarl of the E-boats' engines grew fainter, the Laird of Abernockie and Dearth realised his was the only craft left. He had exactly eighteen men, including himself, to tackle the Goebbels Battery.

Sick at heart, hardly recognising his own voice, he said softly, "All right, snotty, move in. We're going to attack!"

CHAPTER 14

"What is it, Tschapperl?" Adolf Hitler mumbled sleepily, using the contemptuous Bavarian name that he always called his mistress when he was angry with her.

Eva Braun pushed back the lock of dark blonde hair which had fallen over her plump face and said, "Adolf, they want you – on the telephone. It's urgent. Linge the valet was just at the door."

Hitler blinked in the sudden light and sat up with a groan, his dyed black hair tousled from sleep. He had forced his entourage at the Mountain, his Bavarian retreat, to sit up with him until two in the morning watching the latest revue film and he was tired.

"But he knows he has orders not to disturb me before ten," he said grumpily. "He knows I must have some rest when I'm away from the front. How am I to carry on otherwise, eh?"

"Yes, yes, my poor little cheetah," Eva Braun humoured him and rubbed her generous naked breasts against his sullen face. "But it's France. Something to do with a place called Dieppe... You know me, Adolf, I never understand half these things?" She smiled winningly.

Hitler's sleepiness disappeared. "What did you say? What was it, woman?"

Eva Braun put her hands in front of her breasts and pouted. "Dieppe, Linge said, but you don't need to shout at me in that manner."

"Out of my way!" Hitler thrust her to one side and swung swiftly out of bed. Clad in his absurdly old-fashioned nightshirt (which, despite Eva's protests, he insisted on wearing) he strode over to the scrambler phone, picked it up and barked, "The Leader."

"Immediately!" gasped the unknown operator.

There was a slight click and an instant later a well-remembered and heartily disliked voice said, "Heil Hitler!"

"What is it, Rundstedt?"

"As we estimated, mein Führer, the English are landing at Dieppe. They started coming in at four this morning."

"Details?" Hitler rapped, while behind him Eva Braun yawned luxuriously and picked delicately at one of the chocolates she always kept at

his bedside.

"Two main convoys as far as we can gather, with assault troops already being landed in the Varengville-Quiberville area, west of Dieppe."

"The Hess Battery?"

"Correct, mein Führer."

"And are they making progress?"

"Yes, the Battery is under orders not to maintain stiff resistance. And of course I shall not send reinforcements. Before the killing starts, we must allow the English their little victory."

Hitler frowned. "You must not say such things, Rundstedt. The English are a great people. It grieves me greatly to have to kill them. If only that drunken plutocratic Jewish capitalist Churchill would learn sense, we could be allies against the Bolsheviks!"

"I understand, mein Führer," von Rundstedt answered respectfully. He knew that the 'Bohemian Corporal', as he called Hitler contemptuously behind his back, admired his ability as a commander; but he knew too that Hitler would not hesitate to break him as he had broken so many other generals during these last few years. Rundstedt could not afford to make a serious mistake.

"And the Goebbels?"

"The details are still vague, mein Führer. The E-boats which were sent to intercept the English have not yet radioed back full reports. But from what we do know, my Intelligence here at St Germain concludes that we have destroyed most of the troop transports off Berneval."

"*Grandios!*" Hitler exclaimed and Eva Braun watched amused as her lover stamped his right foot on the floor. The gesture which looked so impressive when he was booted and in uniform looked absurd in a nightshirt and bare feet. "But I put it to you, Rundstedt, you must not let the Goebbels Battery fall. It is decisive for our plan."

"It will not fall," the Field Marshal answered with the authority of fifty years of command in his voice. "Tonight I shall take the liberty of calling you again and then, mein Führer, I shall report to you that no Englishman remains on the soil of France – alive. I promise that."

"So be it then, my dear Field Marshal. Let the English die in their thousands on the beaches of France at the behest of the Bolshevik beast. It will be a great victory for you and the Reich."

Hitler put down the phone and stared thoughtfully at his own image in

the big mirror opposite the bed.

"Sweet one," Eva cooed, swallowing her chocolate, and holding out her plump arms towards him, "come back to bed. I shall get you back to sleep again – soon." She thrust out the smooth bronzed curve of her stomach and opened her legs provocatively.

Hitler was oblivious to her charms. Already he had stripped himself of his nightshirt to reveal his misshapen genitals and his head was buzzing with new plans. Churchill had been in Moscow only twelve days before for nearly a week. Once the attack had been wiped out, Hitler would ensure that Goebbels told the world Dieppe was a desperate attempt to open a Second Front in Europe, an attempt forced by Stalin on Churchill at the Moscow meeting. He frowned and wondered if he could make more of it than a propaganda victory. He knew that the drunkard Churchill was just as much of a dictator as he was. But the English Prime Minister still had to contend with Parliament, many of whose members hated him. Was there no way that he could turn the failure at Dieppe into an attack which would enable Churchill's enemies in Westminster to get rid of him?

He pulled on his brown shirt and began tucking it into his breeches. On the bed, Eva Braun sprawled on the silken covers in naked abandon, wide awake now, and bored, munching chocolate after chocolate. Before her she saw stretching another long purposeless day with only the servants to talk to, being hastily hushed out of the way when important people arrived at the Berghof lest the outside world learned that the lonely Olympian figure of their Leader kept a mistress.

Hitler hesitated in his dressing as a horrifying thought flashed through his mind. What if the British did somehow capture the Goebbels Battery? He shivered, tugged at his breeches and walked slowly over to the picture window. Behind the Alps the sun was already beginning to rise, a blood-red ball flushing the harsh sky pink, while the snow-capped mountains were etched in stark silhouette against the sky. Hitler stared out at the coldly beautiful scene which he loved for its cruel Germanic grandeur.

Speaking to the mountains he asked: "What if my Wotan does not reach the Battery in time?"

But the only answer from the mountains was the faint hush of the cold wind.

CHAPTER 15

"I'm dying," the Butcher moaned. "Shitting well croaking before yer eyes!" He looked up at them from his perch on the well-scrubbed wooden seat of his personal thunderbox in the NCOs' latrine and groaned again, his big face green and greasy with sweat.

Outside the Tommy naval guns thundered, making the preliminary offshore bombardment, and the Butcher was mortally afraid, as he always was at the prospect of violent action. Yet he dared not move from his perch.

"Why bother me now, Schulze? Can't you see how bad I am?" Schulze and Matz looked down unsympathetically at the pain-racked Sergeant-Major. "Great balls of fire, my arse is going to burst at any minute."

"See?" Schulze exclaimed. "You don't have to see – I can smell it. The green smoke, in here is strong enough to make old Matzi's hair curl – if the little cripple had any."

"Spare me the humour, Schulze," the Butcher said weakly, wiping the beads of sweat from his forehead with the back of his big hand. "A big Hamburg dummy like you simply can't understand what pain I'm in."

Schulze bit back an angry retort. "Listen Metzger," he snapped. "Something's happened to the Battalion at Belleville. There's a lot of shit flying about up there and from here you can see a couple of the Frog houses are burning. I think Wotan is catching a packet."

"And what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Release those Mark IVs of yours outside."

"Yeah, send them up that road at the double," Matz added.

"A couple of 75mms on them tanks would sort out the mess." Schulze finished off.

The Butcher thrust out both hands, clutching wads of toilet paper, as if he wished to sweep them out of the NCOs' latrine for good. "Heaven, arse and twine, man," he cried, "can't you see I'm about to snuff it? My guts feel as if they're chucking hand grenades about in there."

"Couldn't happen to a nicer feller," Matz commented in an aside to his running mate. "I hope the bastard blows all his gaskets."

Metzger didn't hear. "Listen, I can't release those Mark IVs for two reasons. One – the CO says those tanks don't move without his express,

personal permission. Two, that bunch of wet-tailed greenbeaks outside, who are supposed to man them, would be about as much use as a peterman in a home for warm brothers. They'd kill each other quicker than they would the Tommies!"

"But Sergeant Major," Matz protested hotly. "Perhaps the Vulture ain't in a position to call for the tanks. For all we know he might be up to his big beak in shit at Belleville."

The Butcher farted, his stomach rolling crazily like the opening to the third act of the Götterdämmerung. "Leave me, I feel another attack coming on." He gripped the sides of the thunderbox, as if he might be blown off it at any moment, the veins standing out crimson at the temples. Under his sweat-soaked shirt, Schulze could see the muscles of his stomach making alarming involuntary contractions.

"Holy strawsack," Matz breathed in awe. "I do believe you're going to give birth in a minute, Sergeant-Major!"

"If I could only find the Frog who brewed that beer we drunk last night," Sergeant-Major Metzger groaned, the sweat streaming down his broad face in rivulets, "I'll cut his nuts off with one of his own beer bottles."

"Metzger," Schulze cut in. "Son of whore, what a chance this will be for you! All right, so those wet-tails outside have still got eggshells behind their spoons. There are three of us, all experienced tankmen. We could run the show on that basis." He leaned forward eagerly, his blue eyes glowing. "Imagine it, Metzger, you'll go down in the Wotan's regimental history. Sergeant-Major Metzger, while suffering grievously from the shits, threw himself fearlessly into the battle of Dieppe. When his leg was blown off –"

"He seized it like a club," Matz continued, "and waded bravely into the mass of buck-toothed Tommies."

"And when finally he had his yellow turnip blown off, he tucked it under his arm and snapped to attention –"

"Where his severed head yelled Heil Hitler before he keeled over and fell dead, the sole victor."

"Come, you hero, do you want to live for ever?"

But the Butcher was not to be persuaded. "Yer can talk till yer rupture yerselves," he said. "But I'm not going to release those shitting Mark IVs till I get a direct order from the CO – and that's that!"

Thus in the end they were forced to give up. Schulze looked at Matz. "It's no go, Matzi. Let's get out of here before the yellow bastard gases us

with all that green smoke he's making."

As they retreated from the latrine, Schulze stopped and looked up the coast. The sun was already beginning to rise, flushing the sky a warm pink. Against it, two columns of black smoke rose lazily into the still air above Belleville. Beyond it, out to sea, he could just make out the hazy dark shapes of warships. It was obvious that the Tommies were landing in force and that the Wotan hadn't reached the Battery yet. "Listen Matzi," he said, "you know how Goethe defined rape?"

"Eh?"

"Woman with skirt up can run faster than man with trousers down."

"Did Goethe say that?"

"No, of course he didn't, you stupid little monkey's turd!"

"Well, why mention it then?"

"Because it proves a point."

Matz shook his head. "You know sometimes Schulze I think you've got a little bird up here," he tapped his temple, "which goes twit-twit all the time."

Schulze ignored him. "See here, if we took over those wet-tails and the Mark IVs, who's there to stop us?"

"The Butcher."

"Right and where's the Butcher now?"

"He's making green smoke on his thunderbox."

"So, how fast is he going to run with his knickers around his ankles? Get me, dummy?"

Matz's wrinkled face broke into an evil smile. He winked conspiratorially. "Get you. Well, come on, what are you waiting for, you big Hamburg dum-dum!"

Hurriedly they crossed to where the five Mark IVs were buried beneath their mass of camouflage, sole survivors of the thirty odd with which they entered the fighting in Russia that spring. Around them their youthful, black-clad crews stared, half in fear and half in eagerness to get into action, at the armada slowly emerging from the haze above the sea.

"Pay attention, you bunch of asparagus Tarzans, I want to talk to you!" bellowed Schulze above the noise.

The youths turned round curiously, staring down from the tanks' camouflaged decks at the two NCOs, the one with his wooden leg, the other with two monstrously wrinkled white hands. "You all know me, I'm Schulze,

the First Company's pox-cop."

There were a few hesitant laughs.

"That's right," Schulze urged, "get it off yer consumptive little chests, because it'll be the last laugh you'll get this day! Now all of you are shitty wet-tailed greenbacks, although you might think you're soldiers take it from an old head like me, you ain't. But this day I'm going to do you a favour. Your days of being Christmas Tree soldiers are over." He poked a hideously white thumb at his broad chest heavy with the decorations of three years' war, "Sergeant Schulze is going to turn you into real soldiers – for nothing."

The laughs were fewer this time. But Schulze was pleased to see the look of eager determination in the young men's eyes.

"Now you can drive and you can fire a 75mm – that's all. You know nothing about tank tactics or how to fight a Mark IV. Let us understand that right from the start. Matz here is going to give you the short course, aren't you, Corporal?"

Matz didn't hesitate. He limped forward and pushed aside his big crony. "All right, wet-tails, I'm going to tell you this one time and one time only. The second time, you'll be dead, looking at the potatoes from beneath. So get it! In the kind of street-fighting against infantry we're going into, there are three things to remember. One, keep the arse of yer Mark IV covered all the time, otherwise some nasty Tommy's gonna stick a bazooka round up it – without the Vaseline. Two," he ticked the point on his dirty fingers. "Keep correct road distance – two hundred metres is best. So if the feller at the point buys it, you can still bug out – er, execute a tactical retreat. Thirdly," Matz rolled his evil little eyes around, taking in their tense smooth faces, wondering just how many of these innocents would survive the day. "Watch the road verges on the roads around here. They'll give way just like that," he clicked his fingers sharply, "under the weight of your Mark IV. And a bunch of dum-dums like you wouldn't have a hope in hell of getting out again. You'd be sitting ducks for the Tommy infantry – and they'd just love to toast your eggs with one of those flame-throwers of theirs till they're nice and crisp and as black as Satan's arse!"

"All right," Schulze broke in. "That's enough of the short course, Corporal Matz, we don't want these nice lads wetting their knickers before they've even seen a Tommy, do we?" He looked up at the blond, hard-jawed young lance-corporal standing on the deck of the nearest Mark IV. "You, laddie. I'm going to take your tank as any command tank. Clear?"

"Clear, sir!" The boy sprang to attention as if he were speaking to the Vulture himself.

"The rest of you will proceed up the road to Belleville at the distance Corporal Matz proscribed. Gunners watch out for Tommies in the field. If you see one of them carrying a long blunt thing, it won't be his erection or his box of sandwiches. It'll be a bazooka. Don't hesitate, knock the bastard out before he screws you. I shall take my command vehicle and try to guard the right flank. That's the one closest to the sea, the way the Tommies are going to come in. The ground's dicey, but I'm relying on the talents of Corporal Matz, cripple though he is, to get us through safely. If he don't," he added threateningly, "I'm going to hand him over personally to the Tommies and let them have a dose of him... Once we hit the village, I'll request infantry cover from the rest of the Battalion and then we'll go in and really give those Tommies a nasty swift kick up their skinny, tea-drinking asses. Clear?"

"Clear, Sergeant!" they bellowed back.

Schulze looked at them for a moment as they stood there above him, silhouetted against the blood-red rays of the rising sun and his face softened. "Don't worry, lads, old Schulze won't let you down," he said. Then his voice hardened again. "All right mount up!" he bellowed.

They scrambled into their vehicles, gunners and drivers sliding hastily into their separate hatches. On the turrets the commanders slipped into their earphones. Schulze pushed past the lance-corporal. Below Matz pressed the red button. The tank's 400hp engines coughed throatily like a heavy smoker on a cold morning. Nothing. He pressed the button again. A faint whirr. Something stirred behind. "Come on, Matzi," Schulze bellowed impatiently. "The Tommies'll be back in England for tea by the time you get shitting well started!" Matz stabbed the button for a third time. Suddenly the great engines sprang into noisy life and the whole massive metal monster shook wildly. Matz gunned the engines. Schulze quickly checked the line to see if everybody had started up. Then he waved his band round his head and pointed forward. Roll 'em, my lucky lads," he yelled above the tremendous racket. "We're going to pay the English gentlemen a visit!"

Behind them, Sergeant Major Metzger staggered out of the latrine holding up his unbuttoned trousers with both hands. "Stop," he cried desperately, "you can't shitting well go off like that."

He attempted to run forward to stop Schulze. But his pants dropped to his knees. He staggered, tried to prevent himself from falling but sprawled

full length in the dust, his trousers around his knees, his massive bottom thrust towards the sky.

"Will wonders never cease?" a happy Schulze laughed, "the moon has risen already!"

CHAPTER 16

"Awfully nice of the old Hun, what, sir," Freddy remarked airily, surveying the gully packed five foot deep with wire which led up the cliff from the shore. "Weally makes a chap feel welcome."

"Yer ain't bloody well kidding, Freddy," returned the Laird, taking in the scene on the lonely, still beach. A haze of mist and smoke had drifted across the sea behind them. Nevertheless it was clear that theirs was the only Eureka of the 7th Commando's force which had survived the E-boat attack. Nearly four hundred of his men had bought it within a matter of minutes, dead or drowned even before they had had a chance to have a go at the Jerries.

"Well, Freddy," the Colonel concluded, "it looks as if at least the buggers haven't spotted us."

The tall Scots Guards' officer nodded. "But somebody's getting a bit of a pasting not far off." He swept his cane in the direction from which the persistent crackle of small arms fire was coming. "That'll be the lads of the Froggie Resistance – the op Lord Louis laid on for us. All right, let's get down to cases." He swung round to the men crouched in 2 semi-circle around him in the wet sand, weapons at the alert, their craggy, long Highland faces tense but determined. "Look lads, I won't joss yer, we're right up the proverbial creek without a sodding paddle. But we've been in worse fixes than this before. Think of the ruddy ballsup at Vaagso for example."

"Ay, ay, yer right there, Laird," came the rumble of agreement from the men.

The little CO breathed a sigh of relief and thanked God for the steadiness of his Jocks; cockneys from the Big Smoke would have reacted a lot differently. "Okay, lads, we're gonna have a bash at that Battery. There are only eighteen of us and I don't think we can take the ruddy place as originally planned. But I do think we can have a bloody good try at harassing them." He looked carefully round at their red Highland faces, the product of years of open-air life. "I know what yer all thinking," he said carefully. Yer thinking we're not gonna get out of this mess alive, eh?"

The men lowered their eyes, and he said hurriedly. "I can't guarantee nothing. But I'll tell you this, the Canucks depend on us and if we don't pull it

off, well we've still got snotty here to take us away in his little sailboat. Haven't we Snotty?"

"Right, sir – I mean ay, ay, sir," replied the boy Lieutenant.

"There you are," the Laird beamed at his men. "If a little 'un like that, snatched from the cradle by Winnie, and a Sassenach to boot, is ready to have a go, what have a lot of hairy-arsed old Jocks like us got to fear! All right on yer plates o' meat and follow me!" Without any further ado he slung his rifle more comfortably on his shoulder, hitched up his bedraggled kilt and grasped the first string of wire held by two metal pegs driven deep into the white cliff. The prongs dug cruelly into his palm. But he repressed his cry of pain. The wire was completely taut and hardly gave at all when he put his full weight on it. "Trust old Jerry," he said through gritted teeth. "When he does a job o' work, he does it thorough. We can walk up this sodding stuff like a ladder, courtesy of old Hitler.

"All right, Freddy, you bring up the rear, the rest will follow. If any squarehead shows his head above the top of the cliff, you've my permission to shoot the bugger."

"Thank you, sir."

"But what about me? Can't I go along, sir?" It was the Navy sub-lieutenant. He looked pleadingly at the little CO.

"Better leave it to us brown jobs, we've been trained for it," the Laird began, then he changed his mind. "All right, laddie, come along, if you want and earn yersel the sodding Victoria Cross."

The climb was hell. With not a pair of wire cutters among the lot of them they were stopped time and time again by cunningly constructed wire ledgers which the Germans had designed specifically to stop such an effort as theirs. Each time the Laird, hanging on with one lacerated hand, the blood pouring down his wrist, used his free hand to throw a toggle rope up and over it. Then when it had caught there, he launched himself into space, his kilt flying wildly. As he came down again, he crashed his heavy boots against the wire barrier and wedged thus, continued the climb, heart beating like a trip-hammer, up to the next clear strand of wire.

To the Laird it seemed as though the noise they made should have woken the Germans as far away as Berlin, and struggling painfully through the wire, he felt like one of his favourite winkles stuck on the end of a pin, at the mercy of enemy snipers.

But at last he reached the top, and for a moment he crouched there, his

kilt in tatters, his hands and bare knees cut to ribbons, his lungs wheezing like a pair of broken bellows. Then he pulled himself together and raised his head cautiously above the edge of the cliff. To his right lay the village of Berneval shrouded in smoke, split here, there and everywhere by the scarlet muzzle flashes of rifle fire. Then came a small stretch of woodland, approaching close to the Goebbels Battery. He recognised it immediately from the hours he had spent studying it on the sand-table in training. Each of the machine-gun pits was clearly outlined against the crimson sky, while beyond he could see tiny black figures on the gun turrets with their binoculars trained on the sea, waiting for the fleet to come within range so that they could open fire and destroy it.

"Hell!" the Laird cursed as the next man came to a gasping halt beneath him. He knew they couldn't hang on the cliff very long without being spotted. But how were they going to get over the top into the cover of the wood without being seen by one of the observers on the gun turrets?

It was just then that the survivors of the ill-fated Seventh Commando struck lucky for the first time since they had left England.

The first flight of twin-engined Bostons came barrelling in at 300 mph from the sea. Engines howling, tearing the silence apart, they swooped over the coast at tree-top level. The shallow curve of the bay erupted into a hell of fire. At the battery, the multiple flak chattered crazily. Red, white and green tracer zipped through the pink sky. The first Boston released its bombs. The Laird had no time to see whether they found their target. The air attack was the cover he needed.

"Pass the word down," he yelled the clatter of the flak and the staccato rattle of the heavy ack-ack machine-guns which sounded like a walking stick being drawn across railings, "as soon as you get to the top, make a run for the wood. All right, here I go!"

Grabbing his rifle and hitching his kilt above his knees, the Laird burst across the top of the cliff and set off in wild dash for the cover of the pines. Another squadron of Bostons hurtled across the coast. The flak gunners swung round with the multiple cannon. The air was full of flying steel, as they pounded away. But the Laird ran on, unobserved, twisting and turning to avoid the shrapnel flying everywhere, pelting his way furiously towards the cover of the trees, followed by a sergeant and one other man. They doubled across the cliff top to the wood.

The Laird flung himself full length into the undergrowth, ignoring the

twigs tearing cruelly at his body. With a gasp of relief, he buried his burning, sweat-lathered face into the still damp ground. Man after man crashed into the trees all around him, burrowing their way out of sight as they had been trained to do. The Laird did not raise his head to check them. He was too exhausted from the climb up the cliff and the race across to the wood. Then Freddy's voice, a little less serene than usual, remarked. "It appears we've done it, sir, without being spotted, what?"

The Laird forced himself up by a sheer effort of will and gasped. "Good, lads... very good." He wiped a bloody hand across his sweat-lathered brow and looked at the crimson faces. "First round to us, lads. Now, me band of brothers, into the breach once more, as the Immoral Bard says. Lads, we've got to improvise from now onwards. We can harass the buggers very effectively, if we can nab those MG posts there – there and there." His finger trembled as he indicated the three machine-gun nests to the nearside of the Battery. "With a bit of luck the Froggies will hold off the Jerries behind us, so all we've got to contend with – once we got the MG posts – is the guns and gunners themselves." He sniffed contemptuously. "And we all know what a pregnant duck yer average artilleryman is, don't we?"

There was a soft chorus of 'ays' from the men.

"Bloody lot of soft Nellies who wear pyjamas in bed, everybody knows that. We'll divide into three groups of six – you'll come with me Snotty, as second-in-command. Once we're out of these trees we've got to cover about two hundred yards of open ground before we hit the MG pits on this side.

"Freddy you take group one. Sergeant Gillies," he turned to the elderly NCO who had once been his chief-guy. "you take number two and remember to keep that red, whisky-drinking conk of yourn down – it'll light us up otherwise like a ruddy beacon."

The men laughed while Sergeant Gillies said seriously, "Ah'll bear that in mind, Laird."

"I'll take the third group. Now we crawl the whole way there and woe betide any of you buggers that lets himself get spotted before we get in close. I'll have him on a charge once we're back in the UK quicker than lightning. Once we're in position, I'll give one blast on my whistle and then we go in with," he hesitated for a moment while he fumbled with his skean dhu, "with the cold steel!"

Behind him the young sailor shivered.

"Here come the Brylcreem boys again!" one of the men called as

another flight came winging their way in at tree-top height, flak exploded in harsh red and yellow balls all around them.

The Laird did not hesitate. "Come on, lads, spread out and let's go." He winked at Freddy and his mouth formed the soundless words, "best of luck, you long streak of piss!"

Freddy grinned, then they burst through the trees, the noise they made covered by the tremendous roar of the planes' engines as they began their long crawl towards the unsuspecting MG nests.

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"Freeze!" ordered the Laird.

The handful of men sprawled in the scrub all around him stopped.

"What is it, sir?" the Snotty asked fearfully.

"Wire."

"But we've no cutters."

The Laird ignored him. "Curtis and Menzies," he ordered.

The two privates crawled forward hurriedly. Without a further order, they squirmed on their back in the short wet grass and seizing the lowest strand of wire in their horny hands, took the strain. Under their combined efforts they managed to raise it a foot or so off the ground, the sweat streaming down their faces.

"All right, here, I come." The Colonel crawled swiftly forward, carefully dragging his skinny body through so that his tattered kilt did not catch on a strand. Now Collins and Mackenzie."

The two commandos followed him and took the strain from their comrades. One by one the others followed and grouped around their CO. He nodded, satisfied. "Good lads. All right, now lower it nice and gentle. We don't want to set off no Jerry booby traps."

They were less than twenty-five yards away from their objective now. They could hear the excited chatter of the MG crew quite clearly during the breaks in firing. Cautiously the Laird took out his skean dhu and raised his head. He could count four Jerries in their coal-scuttle helmets. "Four of 'em," he whispered. "By Christ we outnumber them!"

"All right, spread out; you four take the left. Me and this high ranking naval person will take the right. Once I see you're within five yards of the buggers, I'll blow me penny whistle. Off you go."

Obediently the four privates began to crawl rapidly to the left. The Laird looked at pale-faced Snotty and winked. "Don't worry, lad, it'll be just like in the pictures. Come on." Swiftly he squirmed forward, his kilted rump moving rhythmically from side to side just in front of the Snotty's nose, skean dhu clenched between his teeth. He could now smell the Germans, that peculiar odour of German serge uniform cloth and the hard ersatz wartime soap which he had come to know in the last few terrible years. Sending a hasty prayer winging its way to heaven that the other groups were already in position, he transferred the evil little knife to his right hand and thrust his whistle into his mouth. He took a deep breath and blew.

The scream of hoarse Scots rage was followed an instant later by a cry of alarm, as the dust-stained, ragged, bleeding figures of the commandos burst into view. A German tried to swing the gun round, his face frantic with sudden fear. Curtis disobeyed orders and shot him from the hip. He went down screaming, sprawling over his Spandau. The Laird dived at the man trying to take his place, ripping open his stomach. Next to him the Snotty was on the floor of the gun pit, trying to fight off a furious, red-faced gunner who was smashing his ham of a fist into the sailor's face over and over again. The Laird sprang on to the cursing German's back like a tartan-clad monkey. With one hand he grabbed the man's helmet, with the other, slashed his razor-sharp knife across the exposed white flesh of his throat.

Precisely one minute later the last gunner lay sprawled out dead at the bottom of the pit, a bayonet thrust through his chest. Five minutes later, while the boy sobbed gently next to the body of the dead gunner, Freddy dropped into the pit, minus his stocking cap, but otherwise as imperturbable as ever to report, "We've got them, sir – the other two and what do you think we found in my pit?"

"Shirley Temple?" the Laird ventured, highly pleased with the success of his operation and wiping the blood off the skean dhu on his kilt.

"No, a thwee inch gun mortar. Wipping, what, sir!"

"Wipping, Freddy!" the Laird exclaimed, his heart leaping. They were really in business. Not only had they three German machine-guns at their disposal, but also a mortar. Its bombs would probably bounce off the thick concrete of the turrets like ping-pong balls, but it would make the Jerries sit up and take notice.

"Any casualties?"

"Not a one. Though I'm definitely not wegimental without my cap, sir."

The Laird of Abernockie and Dearth grinned. "Silly old sod," he muttered affectionately. "All right, Freddy, nip back to your lot and tell Sergeant Gillies on the way, this is what we gonna do. I'll give you two minutes to clean these stiffs out and set yourselves up and then we're gonna let the Jerries have all we've, got, aiming at the firing slits and air vents wherever possible. By Christ, Freddy you old fart, those buggers over there are going to think that the whole Seventh Commando has suddenly opened up behind them! Before this day is over, Freddy, a lot of them lads behind that concrete are going to be wetting their knickers good and proper."

CHAPTER 17

The squat shape of the lead tank, outlined clearly on the raised coastal road, rumbled towards the embattled village of Belleville. The other three Mark IVs followed, spaced out at regular intervals as Matz had ordered, their 75mm guns swinging from side to side like the snouts of predatory monsters searching for prey.

Watching their progress from the flank, Schulze nodded his approval. He pressed his throat mike and asked, "How's it going down there, Matzi?"

"Dicey," Matz's voice came from the driver's seat strangely unreal and distorted over the intercom, "There's patches of shitty salt marsh everywhere. Hit one and we'd be up to the boogies in mud."

"Tough tittie," Schulze answered unsympathetically. "But keep up the good work. I'll see you get the War Service Cross, fourth class for this."

Matz buried in the belly of the tank, muttered a gross obscenity.

"Yes and your mother too!" Schulze replied and released the pressure on his throat mike. "Corporal," he snapped at the hard-faced boy next to him.

"Sir!"

"Keep your eyes on that ground ahead. If you see anything that looks like marsh grass, sing out fast."

"Sir!"

Schulze sniffed and turned his attention to the smoke-shrouded village a kilometre or so away. He bit his bottom lip anxiously. There was no doubt about it. He could make out both the high-pitched hiss of the SS assault rifle and the slower chatter of what must be Tommy weapons. Wotan was in action up there and by the sound of it the Tommies had them by the short and curlies.

He dismissed the worrying thought from his mind and concentrated on the problem of how he was going to get his little command with its raw unskilled crews into action. Once they reached the village, he decided, he'd let them try a dash down the main street, while he swung round behind the village with his command tank. With a bit of luck he'd pull it off. Infantry was usually shit-scared of armour, especially if it were moving fast. The only problem would be if the Tommies had bazookas. Then they would be sitting ducks in the tight village street with no room to manoeuvre.

"Sir!" the Corporal's voice broke urgently into his thoughts.

"What?" Schulze swung round. The boy was staring at the dark shape of a man which had risen from the long parched grass at the side of the road just behind the lead tank half a kilometre away. He had a strange bell-shaped object in his hand.

"What do you make of it, sir? What is it –"

"Get your shitty body down inside the turret!" Schulze cried and pushed him down. As the man started to run forward to the rear of the slowly moving Mark IV, Schulze whirled the 10-ton turret round. At the same time he swung up the turret machine-gun, ready to go into action immediately, and fumbled feverishly until he had the running man in his sights, bisected neatly by the metal bar. He squeezed the trigger. Four hundred metres away, the running man stopped in mid-stride, his spine arched, his hands raised, as though he were appealing to the heavens for mercy. Then the bell-shaped object tumbled from his nerveless fingers and he pitched forward to lie still in the grass.

Schulze breathed out hard, "Christ on a crutch, that was close!"

"What was it, sir?"

"Sticky bomb. Held by magnet and – ” He broke off suddenly. Other tiny figures had sprung up from the grass and were racing up the road after the tank with bombs in their hands. From their position on the flank, Schulze could see all too well what was about to happen to the lead tank.

"A suicide squad!" Schulze yelled, and grabbed the MG to fire another burst. Another man hit the road, his back torn open. But just as Schulze's slugs scythed through his legs, the leading soldier managed to attach the grenade to the rear of the unsuspecting Mark IV. Even at that distance they could hear the hollow clang as the magnets gripped.

"Holy strawsack," Schulze groaned. "Wake up you shitty dum-dums, don't yer know you've got a cuckoo up yer arse."

The Mark IV rolled on, leaving the dying man behind it, until suddenly there was a thick asthmatic explosion, and it reared up on its back sprockets like a bucking horse. As it crashed down again it began to burn fiercely.

"Get out! Oh, come on, get out!" Schulze cried despairingly, hammering his white fist on the side of the turret. "Make it, lads!"

But no one emerged from the stricken tank and suddenly the air was full of the sweet stench of burning flesh. The young corporal next to Schulze began to vomit over the side of the turret.

There was no time to concern himself now with the fate of the lead tank's crew, for two hundred metres behind it, the second Mark IV had come to a halt, its commander obviously at a loss to know what to do.

Schulze grabbed for the throat mike. "Reverse, you son of a whore!" he yelled urgently. "Reverse." But the tank commander had obviously not got his set tuned to receive. He couldn't hear. Panicked by the fate of the lead tank, exposed as it had been on the elevated road, he decided to get into the grass.

"No!" Schulze cried in despair. "No!"

But the tank commander could not hear his desperate cry and his driver began cautiously to edge his thirty-ton monster over the steep verge. Almost immediately what Matz had predicted happened and the verge began to crumble. A horrified Schulze could clearly see the sandy soil start to yield. Frantically, the driver revved his engine, trying to keep the tank from slipping more, but slowly and inevitably the Mark IV began to slide into the ditch.

The enemy suicide squad did not need a second invitation. Covered from Schulze's fire by the stricken monster's bulk, they swarmed forward to attach their deadly bombs to its sides.

Further down the road the gunner of number three tank tried to swat them off the Mark IV's deck. Man after man fell, but they were invincible. A moment later the Mark IV in the ditch was torn apart. Its ten-ton turret sailed high into the air. Its tracer ammunition zig-zagged crazily in all directions. A crewman tumbled out of the wreckage and attempted to walk on bloody stumps towards number three tank, but a blast of shotgun fire caught him before he had staggered ten paces.

Schulze pressed his throat-mike. "Back off, you stupid sods!" He roared. "Back off right away!"

This time the tank commander received Schulze's message and his driver started to reverse up the road while the commander covered their retreat with smoke grenades.

"Good... that's it," Schulze chuckled. "You and your comrade back right up to those trees... that's the way. Once you get there, everyone on deck with his weapons right to tackle any more of those shitty suicide squads. Keep radio watch and call you up as soon as the road is clear… Over and out!" He released his pressure on the mike.

"All right, what now, Colonel Schulze?" Matz's voice came up from below. "Go on giving orders like that and you'll be able to take over from the

Vulture soon."

"Aw, go and piss in yer dice-beaker," Schulze snarled. "You've got to give those shitty greenbeaks orders like that."

"Yer'll be powdering their sweet little baby bonces next, Schulze!"

"Stick yer prick up yer arse and give yersen a cheap thrill," Schulze snorted. But his heart wasn't in their usual repartee; he knew the Battalion needed the surviving tanks if they were going to break loose from the village. But the two tanks now hidden in the trees would never cover the last kilometre to the embattled village as long as there were still suicide squads out there in the ditches. They would have to be flushed out first and it was up to him to do it.

"Listen Matz," he said, "do you think you could cross that road?"

"With my eyes closed."

"Those verges are tricky."

"Little fish!" Matz said contemptuously. "Didn't I get through the Perekop Isthmus with my boogies up to the top in mud all right?"

"All right, all right. Don't have an orgasm! We all know you're the best driver Wotan has. Now this is what I'm gonna do. We'll cut the road five hundred metres further on. I hope those bastards of the suicide squad will think we're beating it. Then we'll come back and roll 'em up. And you know what I mean, Matzi, don't you?"

Matz did. Wherever the suicide squad men had dug themselves in, they would crush them to death by whirling round and round until the sides of the hole yielded and the whole weight of the tank descended upon the unfortunate men huddled below. "Hey," he protested, "we might land ourselves in the shit there. If we start doing our little *pas de deux* in marshy ground we could find ourselves sinking in deeper than we wanted."

"I know, you little currant-crapper, I've thought of that one too. This is what we're going to do..."

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Schulze dropped the wooden mallet, satisfied with the job he had done on the twin exhaust pipes. "All right," he nodded to the lance-corporal who had been guarding him with his machine-pistol. "Tell Matz to start up-again!"

The boy shouted something inside the turret. Matz pressed the starter button. The great engines sprang to life at once. The little one-legged driver

gunned the motors. Thick streams of choking blue smoke gushed downwards as Schulze had planned they would.

"Tell him it's working," he yelled at the boy above the roar of the engines.

"What's it for, sir?"

"You'll see, lad, you'll see in due course. Now you watch the rear of this here battle wagon and I'll take the front. If any of those bastards show themselves with those shitty bombs, shoot to kill. Clear?"

"Clear, sir."

Schulze knew that everything depended upon Matz. One false gear, one moment of hesitation, one miscalculation with the speed, and they would be crippled just as the second Mark IV had been.

Matz took his time, rolling forward at fifteen kilometres an hour, one eye on the ground ahead and one on the verges, looking for the most favourable spot to move on to the road. Three hundred metres... four hundred... five hundred metres. Then Matz spotted it. A slight indentation in the side of the road which might well give him some sort of purchase.

Matz licked dry lips and eyed the spot carefully. He would have to go at it fairly quickly, then when he was half way up, he would have to double-declutch as quick as hell, bring the gear lever right across the gate and finish the last bit in low gear. Once on the road, he'd then have to rev up, flash through the twenty odd gears of the Mark IV and take her down the other side at speed before the loose soft earth of the verge crumbled beneath the tank.

"Schulze?" he called.

"Yes, monkey's turd."

"I'm going up over there – at two o'clock. You see that hole in the road?"

"Got it!"

"All right, then hold tight. Here we go!" Matz rammed home high gear and revved the engine. The tank started to increase speed, its deck vibrating wildly. On top the young corporal and Schulze grabbed for a hand hold and watched the verge.

"If you believe in the Big Man up there in a white shirt sitting on a cloud, you'd better start praying, son," Schulze cracked, but there was no warmth in his eyes; he knew what would happen to them if Matz failed to make it. The tank hit the verge. The gear lever shook crazily as the tracks took the slope. It rose and seemed to fill the whole driving compartment.

With a quick, impatient gesture, Matz wiped the sweat off his brow and slowly counted five. The engine sounded as if it were on its last legs. Matz lunged forward and grabbed the lever with a hand that was soaked with sweat. Then he crashed the great metal clutch down hard, once, twice. With a grunt he threw the gear lever right across the bar into bottom gear.

For one frightening moment nothing happened. The tank seemed to teeter there, and he could hear nothing except his own harsh anxious breathing. Then all at once the engine broke into its full-throated roar and the tracks began to grip. He had traction. She was going up.

"That's the way, you son-of-a-bitch," he cried enthusiastically, a huge grin over his wrinkled face. "Come on, take it... Take it!”

The Mark IV lurched over the edge of the road. Matz changed up, sliding effortlessly through the tank's score of gears, simultaneously crashing his foot down hard on the accelerator. As it shot forward a machine gun opened up somewhere. Slugs pattered against the metal sides, but Matz had no ears for them.

"That's it, you son-of-bitch," he yelled, recognising the right note immediately. "Here we go – and you'd better get us down right, or you'll have the toe of my dicebeaker up your beautiful tin arse!"

The Mark IV lurched forward alarmingly. The gear lever began to tremble violently once again. An anxious sweat bathed Matz's body and soaked his shirt black. A thrill of fear went through him, for the tank was beginning to slide. He could feel the see-sawing motion and knew that he was losing traction.

“Whore!” he screamed. 'You big fat bitch of a whore... please, please come!” Almost delicately, he eased the right tiller bar back like a doctor touching a woman's breast. Outside he could hear the right track begin to whirl aimlessly and realised that they were definitely slipping.

Mouthing terrible obscenities, Matz continued his delicate pressure on the rod which braked the track and enabled the tank to swing to left or right. Still nothing happened. He eased his foot off the clutch. It was a dangerous move that could bring disaster. But he was not going to allow himself to slide into the ditch without a fight. He exerted a little more pressure on the tiller bar.

It seemed like a miracle when the tank responded, and the right track braked and started to grip again. Matz released the pressure immediately and the Mark IV rolled forward in a straight course, taking the rest of the verge

easily.

"What the hell were you doing down there just then, you shitty cripple," Schulze's voice flooded his ears. "You've gone and made me wet me skivvies! And laddo next to me is giving off green smoke."

Aw, go and piss up your sleeve," Matz snarled, as he rammed home a higher gear and they rumbled forward once more.

They took the first hole without any trouble. Instead of breaking for safety, the suicide squad men decided to stay where they were and let the tank roll over them. It was standard operating procedure, but they didn't know the veterans of Wotan, trained in the brutal, merciless fighting of the Eastern Front. Instead of just rolling over the hole, Matz jerked back his left tiller bar and swung the tank round right on the edge of the cunningly concealed dug-out. He could imagine what the men below him were feeling, their lungs filled with the stench of diesel, their eardrums threatening to burst with the roar, faces seared by the heat from the exhausts, eyes closed like children. But there was no room for mercy. He swung the big tank round once again and the side of the pit started to crumble, eventually giving way altogether. The Mark IV lurched to one side, its tracks still running, churning the bodies of the men below into a bloody pulp.

A group of Maquis tried to make a break for it. Schulze's machine gun chattered. Remorselessly the metal monster rumbled over their twitching bodies.

"Look out!" Matz shouted a sudden warning.

"What is it, Matzi?"

"Soft stuff ahead. Three o'clock next to the tree – and there's a hole with Frogs in it right in the middle."

"Got it, Matzi," Schulze answered, identifying the pit in the middle of the marshy grass. "I'll leave it to you. Let's give the murderous bastards a taste of our special stuff."

Cautiously Matz drove the tank towards the hole. The ashen-faced men, sensing the terrible death that lay ahead for them, poured a furious hail of fire at the tank. Schulze and the corporal ducked behind the turret and listened to the slugs careen off the Mark IV's thick armour. The firing stopped. The terrified Frenchmen ducked, for the monster was almost upon them, its squat metal shape blotting out the blood-red sun, filling the whole world, throwing everything into a hot, diesel-stinking darkness.

Carefully Matz positioned his tank above the hole. But this time he did

not hurl the vehicle round and round in fury until the sides of the pit caved in. Instead, making sure that his tracks were resting on firm ground, he took his foot off the dutch and began to rev the engine.

“What's he doing, sir?" asked the corporal curiously.

“You a country-boy?"

“Yes, from Bavaria."

“What do you do then, hayseed, when you want to get rid of rats in the farmyard?" Schulze snapped, as Matz raced his engines louder.

“You gas them, sir."

“Yes," Schulze said, his face grim at the thought of what was happening to the men below.

“Jesus, Maria, Joseph!” the boy gasped, crossing himself in the Bavarian fashion as he realised why Schulze had hammered the exhausts downwards.

Five minutes later they had cleared the last pit in the same fashion, leaving the Maquis in it sprawled out in the gestures of mortally terrified men, their hands turned to claws of fear, their faces green, their mouths filled with vomit, and were signalling the two tanks hidden in the trees that the road to Belleville was clear at last!

"What now, sir?" the corporal asked, not daring to look back at the men who had died so horribly.

"We're not risking the road again and those verges," Schulze said firmly. We'll leave that to the other two." He surveyed the smoke-shrouded village with narrowed eyes. "You see that track up there?"

"Yessir."

"We'll make for that. It looks as if it'll get on to the parallel road to the main one."

"And then, sir?"

"Then, laddie," Schulze answered with more confidence than he felt, "we looks for Major von Dodenburg and those wet-tails of the First Company!"

CHAPTER 18

Major von Dodenburg, helmetless, his face streaked with sweat and dirt, raged inwardly. Half his company of Hitler Youth volunteers lay sprawled dead on the bloody cobbles outside; his contact with the Vulture, wherever he might be, was completely cut off, and the shaken, scared survivors of his Company dared not even venture into the centre of ground floors to which they clung with desperate tenacity lest a Maquis shot them through the thinly plastered ceiling.

Von Dodenburg cast around desperately for some way out, his back pressed against the dirty kitchen wall. It was no use attempting to assault the primitive wooden stairs that led to the upper floor packed with Maquis gunmen. These were barricaded and they would have been shot down mercilessly before they had set foot on the first rung. Nor was it any good attempting the street again. At periodic intervals the Maquis swept it with their English machine-guns and any attempt at a breakout would have attracted the whole weight of the enemy fire.

In the end von Dodenburg realised that there was only one way out of the trap in which they found themselves: they would have to apply the standard street-fighting procedure, despite the fact that his handful of scared survivors were completely untrained in the technique.

He leaned forward and said more confidently than he felt, "Now listen you Hitler Youth heroes, we're in a mess. But we can get out of it, if we keep our heads and move systematically. Do you understand?"

Hesitantly they nodded, the light of hope beginning to dawn in their eyes.

"We're in a house at the end of the row, and this wall behind me is not covered by any of the enemy. In essence it is in dead ground as far as they are concerned," he lied hopefully. "You get it?"

They nodded again.

"So we are going to use that dead ground to our advantage. We're going to burrow through that wall and if there are no windows to give us away on this side, we'll head for the roof. Once there, we'll take off a few tiles and work our way downwards again. Then the tables will be reversed."

"And we'll be shitting on them and not them on us," one boy

interjected.

"Correct. And once we've got this place cleared of the rats, we'll move on to the roof of the next house and do the same thing all over again. It'll be a damn long-winded procedure, but there is no other way. Are you with me?"

"Yes, we're with you, sir," came back the chorus of eager replies.

"All right, the men on this side of the wall get your entrenching tools out and start hacking away – here. You lot over there begin firing up into the ceiling to cover their noise. I don't want the Frogs to get wise to what we're about. Let them think they've got us nice and trapped down here until we're in position to give them the worse headache they've ever had in their lives."

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Von Dodenburg wriggled cautiously through the rubble and rose to his feet carefully, machine-pistol in hand. Behind him in the street the Maquis gunfire was still going on, but the alley in which he now found himself was silent and empty. He looked up at the side of the house and breathed a sigh of relief. It was bare of windows right up to the yellow leaves of tobacco hanging under the eaves to dry. Swiftly he slung his machine-pistol around his neck.

"As quietly as you can," he whispered to the men waiting tensely behind him in the acrid, smoke-filled room, their shoulders covered with flakes of plaster from the bullet-riddled ceiling. "I'm going up; you follow. Once we're up there, we're in business."

Von Dodenburg stretched to his full height and caught hold of the edge of the blackened roof-beam that stuck through the whitened stone above his head. Hardly daring to breathe, he pulled himself upwards. For a moment he balanced, slim body pressed tight against the outer wall of the upper storey. Only the thin stone wall separated him from the Maquis. If they heard him now, nothing could stop their bullets from tearing his defenceless body to pieces.

He reached up once again, seized hold of the eaves. A piece of rotten wood gave way in his hand and for a moment he thought the whole structure was going to come apart. But then it held. Slowly he began to heave himself upwards. His nose filled with the bitter fragrance of the drying tobacco leaves and suddenly he was dragging himself up and over the eaves on to the tiles themselves.

For a moment he lay there on the warm tiles, catching his breath and

listening keenly to discover if he had been spotted from below, then sat up, peeled off his boots and crept on stockinged feet to the chimney where he left them.

The first man had appeared over the edge of the eaves. Von Dodenburg helped him up and signed to him to remove his boots too. As soon as there were four of them crouched on the red roof, von Dodenburg raised one of the red tiles and placed it carefully to one side. Together they peeled off the tiles until they had uncovered over a square metre of roof. The musty stench of a century of neglect rose to meet them.

Von Dodenburg wrinkled his nose disgustedly, and bending his head, peered carefully below. He could see the usual blackened roof joists and beams, and below them a thin plaster ceiling through which he glimpsed the thin strips of wood that supported the ceiling. They were old and brittle and he knew that a swift kick would send the whole ceiling crashing down.

He signalled the men to close up and whispered to one, "Get your grenade. As soon as I kick a hole in that ceiling, lob it in. Then we all count to four and go in firing." Von Dodenburg knew the danger of carrying out this type of operation with untrained men, but there was no other way. "Make sure," he added warningly, "that we all go in back-to-back. That way," he forced a smile, "we kill the Frogs and not each other!"

"All right, stand back." He rose to his full height and jabbed his stockinged heel through the lathes. They crumbled at once, almost dragging him with them. A jagged hole appeared. There was a surprised "*les Boches*" from below. The boy dropped his stick grenade into the hole carefully. Together they counted four. Below the room was rent by a great explosion. A wave of blast slapped von Dodenburg in the face like a blow. A moment later all four of them dropped through the roof, firing wildly.

The interior of the upper room was an incredible shambles. Dead and dying Maquis lay groaning everywhere, caught completely by surprise. One of them tried to stagger to his, feet, Sten gun in his bloody hands. With almost careless brutality von Dodenburg let him have the butt of his Schmeisser in the face. Next to him, the boy who had lobbed the grenade put his rifle to the base of the Frenchman's skull and pulled the trigger.

"All right, that's enough!" von Dodenburg ordered harshly turning over the body of the man nearest him with his toe. Most of the man's face had gone, torn off by the full force of the grenade. He was dead all right, as were the rest of the Frenchmen crumpled in the bloody mess. "You," von

Dodenburg ordered the boy, "Get our boots down. The rest of you help to get rid of this barricade." He bent down and grabbed at the heavy plank of wood wedged between an ancient chest, which had been used to bar the stairs. "We want the rest of them up here at the double. We've got a damnably long job in front of us if we're ever going to clear this street and get to that battery!"

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But von Dodenburg was mistaken. Ten minutes later, after having cleared the second house, as he was making a personal reconnaissance of the roof of the third house, he heard the unmistakable rattle of tank tracks. He raised himself carefully and peered over his shoulder. His heart leaped as he recognised the squat silhouette of the Mark IV and watched it making its way cautiously down a little track from the fields into the village. The Maquis had already spotted it and were directing a steady stream of tracer at it, but the bullets were bouncing off its thick armoured glacis plate as if they were ping-pong balls.

Von Dodenburg bit his bottom lip thoughtfully. Although the Mark IV was buttoned up for action and he couldn't see the crew, he knew instinctively that only two men could have managed to barrel through the Maquis traps set for the Germans on the coastal road – the big Hamburger Schulze and his little mate Matz. Von Dodenburg's dirt-streaked, bloody face lit up with a smile as if he had just spotted the whole weight of the Bodyguard Division with Sepp Dietrich in personal charge coming to their rescue.

Squirming round on to his back, he fumbled for his signal pistol. He loaded it swiftly and fired two hasty shots into the air. The first flare exploded and bathed the confused melee below a sickly green. An instant later there was a spurt of silver light as the second exploded. The Mark IV changed direction almost at once and von Dodenburg scuttled hastily for the safety of the second house as the angry Maquis fire turned on him, and the slugs whined off the tiles all around.

"It's the First!" Schulze cried excitedly, recognising von Dodenburg's green and white signal flares. "Over there to the left!" He swung his machine-gun round and fired another short burst at the Maquis hidden in the sheds surrounding them.

"I know, I know," Matz cried angrily, "I'm not shitting well blind you

know." He pulled back the left tiller bar and jerked the Mark IV violently round, sending Schulze careening against the hull. His mouth filled with salt-tasting blood.

"By the Great Whore of Buxtehude," Schulze roared, "watch what yer about, you perverted little banana sucker, or I'll rip off yet wooden leg and beat the porridge out of yer brains with it!

Matz wasn't listening. Two hundred metres away a Maquis had flopped down directly in their path, a strange cumbersome object clasped to his shoulder. "What's he up to, Schulze?" he cried.

"It's a Piat – a Tommy Piat!" Schulze yelled, recognising the primitive British bazooka immediately. "If he gets that up our knickers, we won't be virgins any more!" Hastily he pressed the 75mm's pedal. The twin triangles of the sight met on the lone figure. He snatched at the firing lever. The 75mm erupted with a roar. The blast whipped back and filled the closed turret with hot acrid smoke. The HE round struck the ground just in front of the Piat-gunner. When the smoke had vanished, all that was left was a blackened, smoking hole in the ground where the gunner had been.

"What yer trying to do, Schulze," Matz sneered, "knocking out individual stubble-hoppers with a 75mm shell? Don't yer know those things cost twenty marks each?"

"Concentrate on pushing this pram or I'll stick the next one up your –" A group of Maquis burst from a shed, carrying sticky bombs. Schulze let them have a burst with his twin Spandaus. At 800 rounds a minute they didn't have a chance. A moment later the Mark IV rolled over them, its tracks cutting their bodies to pieces and flinging them out on either side like chopped beef.

Matz swung the tank into a parallel street and gasped, for it was littered with the bodies of the First Company; the dead in their camouflaged uniforms seemed to cover it like a crazily patterned carpet.

"Jesus, Maria, Joseph!" the corporal breathed. "The First has caught a packet!"

Schulze nodded glumly, but then his face lit up. Fifty metres ahead of them a well-known figure had dropped from the second floor of the first house. It was von Dodenburg, gesturing wildly with his machine-pistol at the house.

Matz knew instinctively what he meant, revved up and crammed the gear lever across the bar. At thirty kilometres an hour, he crashed with full

force into the ground floor. With bricks and beams raining down upon its turret and the plaster falling like heavy snow, the Mark IV came to a halt, its motor stalled and its long hooded gun poked menacingly through what was left of the window to the street.

"In three devils' name, am I glad to see you!" von Dodenburg exclaimed as Matz and Schulze threw open their separate hatches.

"Got yerself in a nice old mess without us, haven't you, sir?" Schulze said. "Some people oughtn't to be allowed out on their own."

"Very true, very true," von Dodenburg said, then his grin of welcome vanished. "We're in a bad way. You're going to have to take out each second floor along the other side of the street – and be careful, our boys are in most of the houses too, on the bottom floor."

"Be as easy as pissing in a pail!" Schulze said confidently and swung himself behind the big 75mm again. "All right, Frogs," he roared as the corporal thrust home the first shell, "prepare to go to your sodding heaven!"

"And hurry it up," von Dodenburg yelled, as Schulze swung the turret round. "I want this damn street cleared in thirty minutes!"

The great gun drowned his words as it roared into violent life. The first shell hissed flatly through the air and hit the farthest house with a satisfying crack. As the wall blew apart and the Maquis men stumbled into the street, they were mown down by the automatics of the waiting SS men, eager for revenge.

Fifteen minutes later, Schulze popped his head out of the turret, sweat streaming down his grinning face and gave von Dodenburg a comic parody of a salute. "Have I the Major's permission to report that the street is cleared?"

“Fuck off!” said von Dodenburg, and the survivors were surging forward behind the cover of the lone tank. The road to the Goebbels Battery was open again.

CHAPTER 19

It was furnace hot now. Above the still sea the sky was the colour of smoke through which the sun glittered like a copper coin. On the broad sea front at Dieppe the German infantry waited, listening to the roar and snarl of the enemy planes, their gaze concentrated ahead, knowing that the enemy would soon be coming from the sea.

Everything was ready for them. Along the kilometre-long front two lines of barbed wire ran, the second one two metres high. In front of them, dug into the side of the sea wall, the forward artillery observers scanned the still green sea with their glasses. Behind the wire in the pre-war boarding houses and hotels now turned into virtually impregnable strongpoints, the infantry tensed with their rifles and machine-guns, waiting for the order to fire from their HQ, the former Casino.

Out to sea in the great concourse of little ships deployed in a wide arc advancing steadily at ten knots an hour towards their own date with destiny, five thousand other men felt a sense of impending crisis. They had come a long way for this date: from the cold, impersonal streets of Canada's eastern cities; the burning summer heat of the western states; the farms; the logging camps; the great lakes apparently as empty and unknown as the day they had been first created. And they had waited, many of them, three years for it. Now finally it was there and suddenly a whole division was gripped by a strange tension. But it was tension greater than was normal among men going into action for the first time. It seemed to grip their limbs in its icy fingers and immobilise them – still their very heartbeats – as if the waiting men already knew that this would be the first and only time. For they were going to their deaths, each and every one of them.

As if some invisible hand had thrown a gigantic power switch, a great flash of light split the sky and the great bombardment started. Naval guns roared, Mortars belched, rockets raced across the sky trailing fiery sparks behind them. Red, white, green tracer zipped across the still water, and all around the great arc of vessels flares hushed into the air, as the God of War drew his first fiery breath.

"*Achtung!*" the German NCOs bellowed excitedly. Men took aim. Officers blew their whistles and as the first cumbersome landing craft

appeared from the smoke of war, the forward artillery observers began to talk rapidly into their phones.

"*Feuer!*"

As the ramps crashed down and the first khaki-clad figures started on their mad dash up the steep shingle, the snipers opened up at carefully selected targets. Officers, signallers, NCOs crashed to the wet shingle. Within minutes half the officers of the first wave of the Royal Regiment of Canada were dead and dying, a matter of mere yards from the landing craft.

The Royal Hamiltons got as far as the first line of wire. The new blast of fire stopped them dead, leaving them hanging and trapped on the wire like so many scarecrows who twitched weakly every time a new bullet hit their defenceless bodies. The Royal Highland Light Infantry of Canada charged into the hail of death. Boxed in on all sides by the screaming steel, they fought their way desperately up the beach. Within minutes the first two companies had been reduced to shaken, battered, little groups of men, their officers killed or wounded, taking orders from anyone who cared to take command.

The plan had been to land four troops of the new Churchill tanks in the first wave. But as the six tank landing craft of the Calgary Scottish loomed up from the smoke, the defenders concentrated their artillery fire on the cumbersome craft as if they were aware of the deadly cargo they bore. On their decks, the machine-gunners of the Toronto Scottish sacrificed themselves by the score, trying to fight off the enemy with their pathetic Vickers machine-guns. As the craft heeled and reeled under shell after shell, the bodies of the Scottish piled up on their decks like sandbags.

Tank Landing Craft 145, riddled like a sieve, her ramp smashed, her engine room ablaze, reached the beach. But she only had time to land three of her Churchills before she sank. Tank Landing Craft 127, ablaze from stem to stern, her crew dead, a lone rating at her helm, two surviving Toronto Scottish gunners defending her as best they could, staggered into the beach and began unloading her cargo. The Churchills started to clatter out of the burning oven.

Lieutenant Colonel John Andrews, Commanding Officer of the Calgary Highlanders, watched the slaughter of his battalion with an ashen face, his eyes wide and staring. But he knew that there was no time for regret. His own landing craft Number 125 was attracting the full fury of the German fire. Next to her Number 214 was hit once again and began to drift. Andrews' own

craft gained some protection in the lee of the stricken vessel, although down on the deck the Brigade Commander Brigadier Lett was severely wounded and next to him Colonel Parks-Smith was dying.

Andrews took a last look at the sky and his own bright battle pennant flying bravely above him and then he clamped down the hatch of the water-proofed tank which could survive to a depth of six-foot of water. As soon as they were within striking distance of that terrible shore he would give the order to advance.

The stricken landing craft lurched. The Churchill jerked forward, shot through the ramp and disappeared into eight feet of water. There was a crazy moment of panic as the water started to flood the Churchill's green interior. "All right, everybody out!" Andrews rapped curtly and the screaming died down.

The men swiftly opened the escape hatches and like submariners coming up from a sunken sub, they surfaced and swam for the shore. Andrews was last out. He clambered on the turret and cried, "I'm baling out!" Then dived into the boiling, bullet-churned water.

A Navy launch roared in, guns blazing. A gasping, soaked Andrews was dragged aboard. The launch swung round in a wild curve, but was swamped in a deluge of shells. A moment later, engulfed in flames, she sank in the shallows, everyone on board her dead. Only yards away the bright battle pennant continued to fly bravely and as the tide receded, the tank was left high and dry on the wet sand, a mocking symbol of the futility of the whole action.

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Not all the Churchills of the Calgary Highlanders were lost on that murderous beach. Dripping with water, machine-guns blazing, a handful of them fought their way across the shingle, crashing down the wire and rattling on to the promenade. The first one was hit by direct fire and skidded to a halt, white smoke pouring furiously from its engine.

Behind it a lone scout car stalled and the next tank rammed its squat snout into its back bumper. All at once the car lurched forward, its crew hanging on for their lives, as it accelerated down the Boulevard Marechal Foch. The Churchill lumbered after it, bursting through the German defences, pouring shell after shell into the hotels and boarding-houses. Several more

followed. While the grim slaughter continued on the beaches, the lone scout car and its attendant three Churchills, flying the yellow pennant of the Calgary Highlanders' C-Squadron, rattled past the white Casino and disappeared north, heading for the Goebbels Battery.

CHAPTER 20

"What news, Mountbatten?" Churchill put down his second whisky of the morning and faced the Admiral, with his jaw thrust out pugnaciously. Outside the sirens had died away and the ack-ack was already hammering in Regent's Park.

"Bad, sir," Mountbatten answered, taking the seat offered him.

"How bad?"

Mountbatten opened the sheet of paper he had brought with him from his HQ. "HMS Calpe reports that at Blue Beach, Puits, there had been no progress. The Royal Regiment of Canada has been virtually wiped out."

He hesitated and Churchill growled, "Go on, Mountbatten, give me it all."

"Sir. At Dieppe itself on Red and White Beaches, the Essex Scottish and the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry are fighting desperately to maintain themselves under steadily increasing fire. We have thrown in all our reinforcements – the Fusiliers Mont Royal and the Royal Marine Commando – and both have suffered very heavy casualties. The only bright spot is that Lord Lovat's Fourth Commando have destroyed the Hess Battery with relatively light casualties and are already on their way back to England."

Churchill drained his whisky. Almost automatically he poured himself another out from the bottle on his desk and squirted soda water into it. He didn't offer Mountbatten one, but then he knew the Admiral would have refused anyway: it was only eleven o'clock in the morning. He nursed the drink in his hands and asked, "What of the Goebbels Battery?"

Mountbatten raised his voice above the crack of the anti-aircraft guns firing at another German hit-and-run raider. "Bad too, sir. Information is scarce, but Calpe believes the Commando ran into E-boats. I'm afraid they must have suffered heavy casualties too. In short, sir, the situation is deteriorating rapidly. We must assume that the force will soon have to – " he shrugged and didn't complete the sentence.

"Withdraw?"

Mountbatten nodded glumly.

"What is your estimate of the casualties?"

"At present, we can only make a rough count. But two hours ago, we

believed that half the Canada Division had been killed, wounded or taken prisoner. Perhaps some four to five thousand men."

The Prime Minister nodded slowly. Outside, the raiders had disappeared. The guns in Regent's Park had ceased firing. Soon the all clear would be sounding and he could go across to the House. "All right, Mountbatten," he said carefully, "you can pull them out. Start Operation Vanquish. Withdraw our troops – they have suffered enough."

"Thank you, sir."

***

"Why did they do it?" Hitler asked rhetorically, staring at Jodl's pale, clever face. "Why did they land at Dieppe in the first place?"

Colonel-General Jodl, Hitler's Chief-of-Staff, opened his mouth to speak, but the Führer beat him to it. "Because, my dear Jodl, that old fox Churchill wanted them to be slaughtered. He wanted to appease the Ivans and prove to that Jew Roosevelt that it couldn't be done. Look at this rubbish." He put on his steel-rimmed glasses and read swiftly from the Berlin intercepts of the BBC broadcasts: 'A raid was launched in the early hours of today on the Dieppe area of enemy Occupied France. The Operation is still in progress and a further communiqué will be issued when fuller reports are available. Meanwhile the French people are being advised by wireless broadcasts that this raid is not an invasion.'" He took a deep breath. "What pathetic shit!" He bent his head again. "Or this: Communiqué Number Two. 'The troops taking part in the raid on the Dieppe area have landed at all points selected. Heavy opposition was encountered in some places, and on the left flank one landing party was initially repulsed but reformed and later carried the beach by assault. The troops on the right flank, having achieved their objective, which included the complete destruction of a six-gun battery and ammunition dump, have now been re-embarked. In the centre tanks were landed and heavy fighting is proceeding –'" he broke off and dropped the intercepts contemptuously on the floor.

Jodl bent and picked them up again; he was by nature a very tidy man.

"How puerile!" Hitler cried. "Do the Tommies really have to send in a whole division of infantry to blow up half a dozen guns? And why land a whole battalion of their latest tanks on a raid, I ask you Jodl? No, Churchill's hand has been forced. He deliberately planned this raid right from the start so

that it would fail. I mean, why did Canaris's Secret Service people get to know of it so easily in England in May?" He stopped. "My God," he breathed. "Oh, my God!"

"What is it, my Leader?"

"Do you think that – no, it is not possible! Even that whisky-swilling cynic could not be that cold-blooded!"

"Cold-blooded as what?" Jodl asked dutifully.

"As cold-blooded as," Hitler's voice was full of awed admiration, "to leak the whole operation to us from the very start!"

CHAPTER 21

The German positions were silhouetted harshly against the red disc of the sun, every detail revealed. Here and there scarlet flame stabbed the blackness in hesitant confusion. For even after an hour of their sniping and occasional mortaring, the Germans at the Goebbels Battery had not pin-pointed the direction from which the eighteen-man attack was coming.

The Laird of Abernockie and Dearth fired once again, felt the satisfying slap of the rifle butt against his shoulder and saw the spurt of fragmented stone where his bullet struck the concrete next to the firing slit of one of the guns. "Right up the Kyber!"

"Fanny's drawers!" one of his men commented. "Wouldn't get much for that on the range, sir."

The Colonel grinned. "I suppose you're right, Curtis. But still it keeps their big square-headed noggins down and so far the buggers haven't fired those nasty popguns of theirs!"

"I wonder why not, sir?" the Snotty, sprawled next to him in the pit, asked.

"I don't know exactly, laddie. But I can guess."

"Yes?"

"Something's gone wrong with the op and the Navy's not coming in as close as was anticipated," the Laird replied, casually firing again at the white blur of a face that had suddenly revealed itself at the slit.

The blur disappeared and Curtis cried, "Bullseye, sir."

"Yes," said the CO, "not bad for a little bloke like me, I must admit."

"Then why are we hanging on here, sir?" continued the Snotty. "I mean don't think I'm windy, sir, or anything like that, sir, but I just wonder what purpose we're serving here if the battery's not going to fire at our people."

"I know you're not scared, lad, and even if you was, we all are, you know, but the evacuation is scheduled to start at thirteen hundred hours. Okay, then the Royal will have to start really coming close to shore to coves it and you can imagine that the Jerries won't miss a target like that." He shrugged easily and fired again an instant later. "I think it's then that we really can come in useful."

"And after that, sir?" the boy persisted.

"Grr, you ain't half a worrier, laddie! After that, it's anybody's guess what'll happen. You know what they say, if me Auntie Fanny had a moustache she'd be me Uncle Joe. Let's worry about that one when the time comes."

But the time had already arrived. The Laird had hardly spoken the words when the first Spitfires came zooming in at 400 mph and at tree-top height. They hurtled round and round over the coast to the left of their attackers, the smoke cannisters tumbling from their lean bellies in crazy confusion. Almost at once a great screen of white smoke began to ascend to the sky. The red ball of the sun was blotted out and the front of the battery was blanketed with the start of the smoke screen.

It was the signal the German gunners had been waiting for, it seemed. A zinc-coloured light blinked at the furthermost turret. An orange flash, a great wild puff of black smoke. A crazy tearing noise struck the air.

"There the buggers go!" yelled the Laird and opened his mouth automatically, as the hot blast whipped against his face. "Come on, lads, let's see what we can do. Aim right for the slit, as the actress said to the bishop!"

They set to work with a will, directing a steady stream of rifle and machine-gun fire towards the apertures of the great guns. Concrete flew everywhere. Bullets whined mournfully. They could hear the regular thump-thump of the mortar bombs landing on yet another turret, sending chunks of stone hurtling in every direction. Yet the enemy guns continued to fire.

The Laird lowered his rifle. "Bugger this for a tale! This ain't doing no good at all!" For a moment he crouched there on his heels, while Curtis at the Spandau poured a stream of fire into the German positions. Then he came to a decision. "Snotty," he yelled, "you're in charge here for a mo'. I'm gonna have an O-group conference with me second-in-command."

Without waiting to see the young sub-lieutenant's reaction, he grabbed his rifle by the barrel and crouched low, doubled across the rough ground to the pit occupied by Freddy Rory-Brick and his men.

"Freddy," he gasped, diving in beside the hatless Guardsman, "sod this for a lark, we're doing about as much good here as one of each waiting for vinegar."

"What?" Freddy yelled above the roar.

"Bloody hell, can't you speak English! I said we're bloody well wasting our time here. So far we've kept 'em in their turrets all right, but now we're not stopping them firing."

"Agweed, sir, but what do you suggest?"

"Concentrate and have a bash at one of the buggers. All or nothing. If we take the turret, then we're in business. We can have a go at the others with its gun."

"Isn't thet wisky, sir?"

"Of course, it's sodding wisky! It's wisky crossing the road in the Big Smoke. It's wisky bending down to pick up a feather – yer can knacker yersen that way. So what? You don't want to live for ever, do you, Freddy?" He nudged him affectionately. "Eh?"

Freddy smiled. "I'm with you, sir."

"Good, no time for fancy tactics. We go in from three sides. If we're lucky, they'll be too busy with their popguns to notice us. If we're unlucky, I'm sure we'll make lovely corpses. Are you on?"

"On, sir!"

Five minutes later the little band of commandos were ready. The Laird waited tensely until he saw the gun of the turret they were going to storm raise its barrel prior to firing at the unseen ships once again. "Get ready!" he yelled. The men clasped their weapons even tighter in hands that were wet with sweat. The Laird raised himself to one knee, his ragged, torn kilt hanging in the dust. The gun thundered. "Now!" he cried above the deafening noise.

The commandos streamed forward, firing from the hip at an enemy safely ensconced behind his foot-thick concrete defences. They caught the gunners off guard. By the time they had begun to react, the commandos were already within the shelter of the turret-wall.

"Down!" cried the Laird above the crackle of surprised, frightened enemy fire, "get down! Round the back!"

The men bent double below the level of the enemy firing slits and pelted after him to the rear of the turret. A large metal door stopped them. The Laird grabbed the handle and threw it open. Menzies just behind him knew the drill without having to be ordered. He threw in his last grenade and the Laird slammed the door shut again. There was a thick, muffled cramp, and smoke streamed out of the nearest slit. They heard the sound of glass shattering somewhere.

The Laird threw a glance behind him. Freddy was in position, Tommy gun at the ready. “Now,” he yelled, and threw the door open again.

Splay-legged, body crouched, Freddy poured a vicious hail of fire into

the smoking gloom. The artillerymen, screaming and terrified, faces black with smoke, a few of them suffering from multiple wounds, walked straight into the bullets.

The commandos scrambled frantically over their writhing bodies. The bunker stank of sweat and cheap tobacco – even the acrid smell of cordite couldn't hide that. For a moment they stood there in the gloom, hesitant, wondering which passage to take.

"Stwaight ahead," Freddy suggested.

"Right!" the Laird drew his skean dhu. "Come on lads, here we go again!"

A soldier in his undershirt appeared from a door on the right. He had a pistol in his hand but he never managed to fire it. The little knife hissed through the air and caught him directly in the chest. His knees gave way beneath him and he sank to the floor. Menzies kicked him in the face as he ran by.

The Laird threw open the metal door that barred their way. Light streamed out from the caged electric bulbs in the ceiling to reveal the gleaming breech of the gun and the naked sweating backs of the gunners bent over the huge shell they were loading.

The commandos fired, the noise of their rifles making an ear-splitting din in the confines of the bunker. The gunners hadn't a chance. Their naked upper bodies were riddled with bullets as they dropped to the concrete floor all around the breech.

"Look out, sir!" screamed Curtis frantically.

Freddy Rory-Brick took the burst in the stomach. At that range it threw him round like a dancer executing a turn. He grabbed wildly for the support of the wall, but his strength failed him. His hands clawed the length of the wall, his nails breaking, trailing a smear of blood behind them.

"*Kamerad! ... Bitte, Kamerad!*" called the bespectacled gunner who had shot Freddy from the corner where he had hidden, and dropped his Schmeisser.

"Fuck Kamerad!" the Laird hissed, beside himself with rage. He picked up the Tommy gun that had fallen from Freddy's nerveless fingers and fired a mad burst into the terrified gunner.

At last, when the German was a mutilated corpse on the floor, the Laird dropped the tommy gun and turned to Freddy. Snotty had propped the wounded officer up against the wall, while the others cleared the dead

Germans from the gun.

"I'm afwaid," Freddy gasped painfully, his face the colour of clay, the end of his nose already pinched and waxen, "I've … bought a bad one …"

"Ballocks!" the Laird snapped angrily. 'Don't even talk that kind of codswallop!" Hastily he bent to one knee and fumbled with the blouse of the Guardsman's battledress. He ripped open his blood-soaked, silken khaki shirt and saw that the burst had ripped open Freddy's chest. Through the huge hole he could see splintered white bone among the red mess and the pale grey of his viscera pulsating obscenely. He recoiled, unable to hide the look of horror in his eyes.

"That bad?" Freddy inquired weakly but calmly.

"Of course not, Freddy." The Laird ripped open his field dressing and placed it over the gaping wound. It was no use. The yellow lint soaked through almost immediately. The Laird stared down at it helplessly.

"Give my love to my wife and the boy," Freddy said faintly, his eyelashes fluttering.

"Cor ferk a duck, Freddy, you'll live to give it to 'em yerself," the Colonel lied.

"Do you weally think so …" Major the Hon Frederick Oakley Rory-Brick's head flopped to one side. His mouth dropped open and he was dead.

It was just then that Curtis, peering through the observation slit, cried excitedly. "Tanks, sir! Our tanks – they're Churchills!"

CHAPTER 22

C Troop of the Calgary Highlanders caught the survivors of the Wotan's Third and Fourth companies just as they had begun their advance out of Belleville behind the cover of the two Mark IVs which had finally freed them from the trap. One moment the hundred or so shaken youths, urged on by the Vulture's vitriolic tongue and the kicks of the veteran NCOs, had been in clear sunlight; the next they were sealed in the grey gloom of the smoke screen, confronted by the frightening bulk of the three squat Churchills.

The Canadians were as surprised as the SS. They, too, were experiencing their first taste of battle, but they had three years of training behind them and reacted quicker and better than the Wotan crews.

They immediately took up the hull-down position. The SS tankers reacted the way inexperienced crews always did. Confident that their 75mms could out-gun the short six-pounders of the Churchills, they swung their turrets round, but forgot they were exposing the whole length of the tanks to the enemy fire.

"Cretins!" the Vulture raged, while all around him his men scrambled for cover. "Offer them your glacis plate. Don't give 'em your broadside!" In his fury at the inexpert way the Mark IVs were being handled, he lashed his riding crop against his boot. "Great crap on the Christmas Tree – give them the glacis!" But the eager young tankers rattling into action did not hear him. "Then die, you idiots!" the Vulture cursed and threw his cane at the ground.

The two Mark IVs fired the first shots. Their long, hooded guns squirted scarlet flame. Both shells struck the little armoured car as it scuttled for cover. It slithered to a sudden stop and slumped to one side in flames.

"My God!" the Vulture gasped, hardly believing it possible that men could be so stupid; they were using high explosive shells instead of armour-piercing ones needed for tank combat. “AP!” he screamed, his face scarlet. “Use AP!” he pulled out his pistol and fired a volley of furious shots at the rear of the Mark IVs.

But already it was too late. While the inexperienced gunners madly cranked round their 75s to bring them to bear on the hull-down Churchills, the three tanks fired.

The closest Mark IV reared up like a live thing as the shell caught it in

the boogies. The second shell struck it. The whole tank trembled violently. Frantically the young, panic-stricken crew fought to get out before the tank went up in flames.

Again the Canadians were more experienced. They were waiting for the move. Three Besa machine-guns spoke as one, concentrating on the stricken Mark IV. The driver took a full burst in the chest and flopped down in his hatch again. The commander and the gunner managed to get out of the turret, but were killed before they could spring from the deck.

The Vulture grunted. "Serves the damned fools right!" he exclaimed and watched how the second Mark IV reeled from side to side like a ship in a storm, as the Canadians pounded it with shell after shell. In his fear, the driver reversed blindly, and crashed the tank into its burning companion. The gleaming steel scars which the AP fire had gouged in its destroyed sides glowed bloodily in the flames. But only for an instant for the flames had spilled on to the other tank. A hand clawed its way out of the turret, a hand already charred black, dripping burning flesh. As it poised there it looked as though the black bones were extended to heaven, pleading for mercy. But there was no mercy for the trapped crew. The tank exploded in a burst of bright, oil-tinged flame.

The Vulture ducked hastily as a severed boogie hurtled just above his head. When he raised his head again, the Mark IV had disappeared with nothing to mark its passing except for a patch of scorched earth.

The Vulture was not concerned with the fate of the inexperienced tankers. His concentration was fixed on the Churchills which had already disappeared again into the smoke screen. He cursed bitterly and rose to his feet, for he knew instinctively where they were heading. Now he had three damned Tommy tanks between him and the Goebbels Battery.

CHAPTER 23

Under the cover of the Spitfires and Hurricanes sweeping low over the burning town, machine-gunning the suddenly triumphant Germans, the survivors started to withdraw, falling back slowly to the mile-long, scimitar-shaped beach, the heart of the bloody battle for Dieppe. Out at sea the little boats pressed closer and closer, Oerlikons pumping away at the Focke-Wolfes sneaking in from the land. Behind the little ships, the destroyers swept as near as they dared and in the hull-down position pumped shell after shell into the outskirts of the town where they knew the Germans were.

The beach itself was still hell. Everywhere lay the ripped remnants of shattered tanks and beached, burnt-out landing craft, behind which the survivors, wounded and unwounded, sheltered as best they could, still returning the enemy fire. Behind them the water was full of the debris of battle and men, some of them floating face downwards, still in their life preservers.

By now the tide had begun to ebb. This meant that not only would the survivors have to cross two hundred yards of beach swept constantly by murderous fire, they would also have to wade out a further fifty through the shallows until they reached the boats. HMS Calpe ordered the destroyers to go closer.

The German bombers seized their chance. Breaking through the smoke of battle which lay across the sea off Dieppe, three Dornier bombers fell on the destroyer Berkeley. The slim rakish destroyer was named after Admiral Berkeley, who two hundred and fifty years before had reduced Dieppe to ashes with his fleet. Now it was the turn of the ship bearing the long dead Admiral's name to suffer the same fate.

A Spitfire zipped across the sky, eight machine-guns chattering. One of the pencil-slim, two-engined Dorniers broke its dive, jettisoned its bombs uselessly in the sea, yards away from the destroyer. But the other two pressed home their attack. Their bombs hit the destroyer amidships, shattering the bridge. Wing-Commander Skinner, the official RAF observer, watching the start of the rescue operations through his binoculars, was killed immediately. His friend, the US Army Air Corps observer, Lieutenant Colonel Hillsinger was blown off the bridge on to the forward deck, where he stared in both

anger and awe at the bloody stump where once his right foot had been.

Minutes later HMS Berkeley disappeared beneath the waves.

The defenders of the perimeter began to give way, forced back relentlessly by ever-increasing German pressure. The handful of Rangers still alive who had been attached to the commandos, surrendered. But they were still defiant. Excited by their capture of the first Americans they had seen, the Germans asked one tall bareheaded Ranger: "How many American soldiers are there in England?"

The Ranger looked down contemptuously at his captors and drawled in his Texan accent: "Three million. And they're all as tall as me. Shit, they have to keep 'em behind barbed wire to stop them swimming the Channel to get at you bastards!"

Another group of French-Canadians, the sole survivors of a company of the Fusiliers Mont Royal, surrendered under the command of their sergeant. The Germans disarmed them and, forcing them to strip to their underclothes and boots, made them face a wall with their hands in the air.

But their sergeant, Dubuc, had now regained his second wind after the fighting of the morning. Carefully he tried to work out how many of the German patrol which had captured them had moved on deeper into Dieppe. In the end he estimated they were being guarded by exactly one German.

Dubuc let his head slump to one side, as if he were utterly weary and dejected. From this angle, he could watch the solitary guard, his rifle pointed at the backs of his prisoners, his eyes continually flickering towards the burning front.

The sergeant gave a soft groan and seemed to collapse against the wall. "Water," he croaked piteously. "Please, water!"

The German took a step forward, caught off guard. Dubuc dived forward. As the German stumbled to the ground, Dubuc's hands went round his neck and strangled him.

Dubuc rose to his feet, breathing very hard. But when he spoke, his voice was calm. "Go," he commanded in French. "Back to the beach. It's every man for himself now."

The men disappeared into the mass of smoke-shrouded back streets, trotting through them in their singlets and shorts like a group of runners who had unexpectedly found themselves in the middle of a battle.

Dubuc reached the burning beach alone. He found his Colonel wounded and lying on the sand. After reporting and excusing his un-military

appearance, he gathered the CO up in his arms and began the long perilous passage to the waiting boats.

The Essex Scottish began to withdraw as a formation. Throwing the last of their smoke grenades over the esplanade wall to cover their retreat, they picked up their wounded and braved the two hundred yards of hell. Like grey ghosts they staggered through that tormented wasteland, taking casualties all the time from the withering German fire, brushing past the dead bodies of their comrades hanging on the wire like bundles of wet rags, dodging gratefully behind the cover of shattered tanks that loomed up suddenly out of the shroud of smoke. Some of them reached the water. They started to wade through the shallows, blindly scrambling through the green water, brushing aside the mess of battle-equipment, vomit, bodies, severed limbs – wide staring eyes seeing only one thing: the boats.

Some of them reached them and were dumped in the confused mess of the transports. The quick and the dead thrown together in crazy promiscuity, lay side by side on the open decks of the ships: shivering black-faced men in oil-soaked khaki, eyes dazed by the swiftness of the disaster and their rescue; sailors retching the black fuel oil, with which their lungs were filled; the cruelly wounded, crying out for help to harassed doctors and medics who were now beginning to run out of supplies; the fresh dead being rolled over the side like logs of wood, heads lolling obscenely to make room for more and more wounded. And over the whole terrible scene hung the heavy stench of cordite, fuel oil and blood.

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The Canadian HQ retreated from the Casino, which had covered the withdrawal to the beaches as best it could so far. The senior surviving Canadian officer Brigadier Southam refused to be evacuated. Still in radio contact with HMS Calpe, he was determined to rescue every man if possible. Crouched behind the wall of shingle at the head of the beach he set up a new HQ, harassed all the time by enemy fire, his commands drowned by the roar and snarl of the ferocious dog-fight between the RAF and the Luftwaffe now being waged above the beaches.

By now a thousand men, half of them wounded, had been rescued. But the Germans were closing in on all sides, and the naval commander Captain Hughes-Hallett on HMS Calpe knew that it wouldn't be long before the

Luftwaffe and the heavy guns of the Goebbels Battery started ranging in on his naval force. Nevertheless, he knew from Southam's radio messages, that the Royal Hamilton were still fighting at Pourville and that at Blue Beach, a company-strength group of Canadians was still holding out against all the Germans could throw at them, as were odd pockets of infantry all along the embattled shore.

Yet time was running out rapidly. He had to make a decision. He beckoned over Commander McClintock who was running the rescue operation and ordered him to make a personal reconnaissance of the situation.

At twenty minutes past twelve, Commander McClintock signalled Hughes-Hallett: "No more evacuation possible!"

On board the Calpe, the Canadian staff officers pleaded with Hughes-Hallett to wait a little longer. Two brigades of the Canadian Division had been shattered, with the loss of all their senior officers. They could not bring themselves to leave Dieppe and abandon the leaderless survivors to their fate. But Captain Hughes-Hallett was adamant. Reluctantly he signalled Commander McClintock: "If no further evacuation possible, withdraw."

The evacuation fleet began to assemble hastily under the cover of smoke, an umbrella of fighters above them, trying to protect them from the German dive-bombers. Meanwhile Hughes-Hallett made one last attempt to weigh up the situation for himself.

At ten minutes to one precisely, HMS Calpe came out of the smoke cover, her sharp prow cleaving the water, all her four-inch guns firing as if she wished to challenge the whole weight of the German military machine. The Germans answered the challenge readily. Steaming broadsides along the length of that long beach, weaving in and out of the incessant German shell-bursts with spouts of churning white water washing over her decks, the Calpe braved the furious enemy barrage.

The beach was a scene of tortured desolation; it looked as if some elemental force had swept along it, scooping out huge hollows, flinging the petty man-made machines of war from side to side, as if they were toys, tossing the bodies of men high into the air and smashing them down again on to the cruel shingle limp and dead.

Captain Hughes-Hallett shook his head sadly. HMS Calpe swung round, her screws churning furiously, and disappeared back into the smoke screen.

Ten minutes later, all hope gone now, Brigadier Southam sent his final

signal. More and more enemy troops were being detrained from Dieppe railway station; the first of his surviving Canadians were beginning to surrender.

CHAPTER 24

The three Churchills of the Calgary Highlanders' C Squadron rattled triumphantly towards the Goebbels Battery, unaware that their effort was to no purpose. Through a hole in the smoke screen, the leading tank commander caught a glimpse of the battery with one turret apparently firing at the others. He understood immediately. "Say guys," he cried excitedly over the radio to the rest of the troop, "the commandos must have gotten one of the Jerry guns! Let's go in and give 'em a hand!"

Von Dodenburg, cautiously leading the advance through the smoke behind Schulze's Mark IV, heard them first and knew immediately that they were the enemy.

"Down!" he whispered rapidly, as the rattle of the advancing tanks grew louder. The company flopped simultaneously into the drainage ditch at the side of the road leading to the Battery and took up their defensive positions. Von Dodenburg doubled forward, grabbed hold of the towing hook at the back of the Mark IV and swung himself aboard. Swiftly he clambered up on the turret.

"What's burning, sir?" Schulze asked cheerfully, looking up at his dirt-streaked face from within the green-glowing turret.

"Tanks – enemy tanks," von Dodenburg gasped. "Look!" he pointed at the squat shapes beginning to emerge from the smoke.

"Ouch, my aching eggs!" Schulze exclaimed. "Three of the bastards!" Hastily he pressed his throat mike. "Matti, head for that rise at two o'clock! Move it. Get yer skates on!" He dug his elbow into the corporal, as the tank increased speed. "All right, you Hitler Youth hero, park your heroic keester behind that pop-gun. Sergeant Schulze is going to win you the Iron Cross third class this day." He swung round and looked inquiringly at von Dodenburg.

Despite his weariness and anger, von Dodenburg grinned. "All right, you big waterfront rogue, you're in charge. Button her up, I'm going." He ran to the edge of the Mark IV. "And play it carefully. Don't get your turnip blown off!" He dropped lightly over the side.

"Don't worry yourself, sir," Schulze shouted after him, as the tank

rolled up the little hill, "Mrs Schulze's favourite son ain't gonna let some buck-teethed Tommy put an explosive enema up his peace-loving arse."

"Driver, halt!" cried the leading Canadian tank commander hurriedly as they emerged from the fog and he spotted the German tank in the hull-down position behind the little hill, its long, hooded gun pointing directly at the advancing troop. "Traverse left... two hundred yards," he ordered. "Jerry tank... Fire!"

The Churchill jerked to a halt. Next moment it shook with the shock of the six pounder firing. The smoke swept away and the Canadian could see the white glow of the tracer shell as it curved upwards slightly and slowly, before plunging down. To the right of the German's turret, the steel glowed a sudden dull red.

"Jesus H Christ, you've hit him, Charley!" cried the tank commander exuberantly.

"The bastard won't brew though!" shouted the sweating gunner, adjusting his sights frantically. "I'll try to get in the joint between the turret –"

The German 75mm spurted flame. The Churchill rocked violently. A hot acrid blast wave swept through the turret, slapping the commander and the gunner against the wall. The commander shook his head, bemusedly, then recoiled in horror. In the smoking shambles of wrecked equipment at his feet lay a Negro's head.

Beside him Charley giggled hysterically. “Tod,” – he meant the driver, whose headless body was still propped up in its seat, both hands gripping the steering rods – “looks like goddam Al Jolson!"

The tank commander pulled himself together. His face blanched with horrified disgust; he kicked the blackened head into the bottom of the tank, where small tongues of blue flame were already licking out greedily for the main ammunition storage bin. "Bail out, Charley!" he screamed fervently. For Chrissake, bail out!”

The two of them scrambled frantically out of the burning turret. Gasping hysterically, they dropped over the side, straight into Major von Dodenburg's fire. They died without even knowing who had killed them.

“Now the next bastard!” Schulze cried excitedly.

The corporal, bleeding from the wound in his cheek looked at him numbly, as Schulze rammed home another shell. "Eh?" he queried dully.

Schulze punched him in the ribs. “In,” he rapped, as the breech slapped close.

"On," the corporal retorted. Through his sight, the next Churchill was neatly outlined against the cross-wires.

"Fire!" commanded Schulze.

The gunner squeezed the firing bar. Nest to him, peering through the periscope, Schulze automatically opened his mouth against the blast so that his eardrums would not burst. The Mark IV jerked back on its rear sprockets. Acrid smoke filled the turret. The blast wave slapped Schulze across his face. He blinked and heard the darter of the shell case as it tumbled, hot and smoking, to the deck.

Two hundred yards away, the second Churchill had come to a halt too, a gleaming silver hole skewering its side.

Schulze rammed home another shell and slapped the breech lever up. "In," he cried.

"On!"

"Kill the bastard this time – Fire!"

The corporal jerked back the lever. The gun erupted. The shell struck the Churchill squarely in its fuel tank. A sole Canadian dropped from the turret, his overalls a mass of blue flame. Von Dodenburg's machine-pistol chattered. The Canadian jerked convulsively and then was still. The flames began to eat his body away.

The third Churchill began to reverse into the smoke screen, its commander firing the smoke grenades on the turret as it went. But Schulze, his blood up now, was not going to be cheated of his prey. "Matzi...!"

"I know!" the one-legged driver thrust home low gear.

The Mark IV clattered into the white gloom after the Churchill, its 75mm turning cautiously from side to side in a forty degree arc, as it sought out its prey.

A hundred yards away, the commander vehemently cursed the frightened driver. "You mother-loving, chicken sob!” he yelled angrily, as the Churchill swayed from side to side on the rough ground. "What in Sam Hill did you wanna go and do that for? We could have took the bastard!”

The driver wasn't listening. The sweat stood out on his brow in petrified beads, his wide staring gaze was fixed on the smoke behind them, fearful that the German tank might appear at any moment and slaughter them

as it had done the rest of the troop.

"I order you to stop and fight!" his commander cried, beside himself with rage.

"Yeah, for Chrissake, Slack-Ass," the gunner added, "knock it off, will ya? I can pin his ears back for sure - with the six-pounder."

"Here it comes!" the driver screamed. "To the left!"

The commander pressed his eyes to the periscope and saw the Mark IV looming up out of the smoke less than a hundred yards away, its 75mm pointing away from them; it had not yet spotted the fleeing Churchill.

"Driver – halt!"

Nothing happened. The Churchill continued to bump over the rough cliff-top.

"Joe, in the name of heaven, fire!" the commander yelled in despair, fumbling for his .38, "before the bastard sees us."

Furiously the gunner spun the turret. The Mark IV slid into his sights, blacking out everything else, it filled his whole world. He could see the great black and white cross, the silver-gleaming shell-hole, every rusty rivet, every oil-dirtied bolt. Holding his breath unconsciously, he raced the wheel of the range drum until it registered one hundred yards.

"On," he snapped.

"Joe, I order you to halt," cried the commander, poking his revolver between his big boots in the general direction of the driver's head below, "or I swear to God, I'll blow the back of your goddam yellow head off!" He clicked back the hammer.

"Hurry!" the gunner urged fervently, "they still haven't spotted us!" Still no reaction. "All right, you rotten bastard, take this!" The commander pressed the trigger.

In those close confines, the revolver's explosion sounded like cannon fire. The gunner lunged instinctively at the firing lever. The unsuspecting Mark IV disappeared from the round circle of gleaming glass sight as if dragged away by an invisible hand, and a moment later the six pounder's shell whistled harmlessly into the air, well above the Mark IV, as with the dead driver's foot jammed down firmly on the gas pedal, the Churchill sailed over the edge of the cliff, her crew screaming helplessly, and crashed into the sea a hundred feet below.

"By the docked dick of the Great Rabbi!" Matz breathed out in a long,

awed sigh, as the shell fired by the last Churchill whizzed harmlessly past them to explode somewhere beyond the Battery, "that nearly parted our hair for us!"

"I can't even move," Schulze agreed in low voice. "If I did, it would start dripping down me leg!"

Behind them in the smoky gloom, Von Dodenburg rose to his feet and commanded in a low voice heavy with weariness. "All right, on your feet, men! Advance, we're nearly there now."

CHAPTER 25

The Laird sadly watched the last Churchill disappearing into the smoke, leaving behind the two burning wrecks. Instinctively he knew that there would be no further attempt now to break through to them. He sensed too that the whole operation had failed. The RAF had disappeared from the battlefield and from the direction of Dieppe, the sound of firing was dying away.

He sat down on the floor with the rest and told himself that what was left of No. 7 Commando had done its bit. Although the shells they had been firing until the Churchills had arrived on the scene had whizzed harmlessly over the other turrets because they had been unable to lower the big gun sufficiently to hit them, they had prevented the Germans from firing effectively out to sea during the crucial period when the fleet had been assembling for the landing.

The Laird felt very weary. They had been fighting now for over twelve hours. They stank of sweat and cordite. It was over three hours since they had last eaten – a piece of bitter chocolate and a handful of raisins from their iron ration – and they were down to the last drops of water left in their water-bottles. The end, he knew, was not far off.

"What do you think, sir?" asked the Snotty at his side.

The Laird turned and slowly wiped the greasy film of sweat from his brow with the back of his sleeve. "Usual cock-up, kiddie," he said thickly through scummed lips.

"Do you think we'll get out?"

"No."

"What if –"

"We won't surrender. Look at them," he swept his hand around the circle of his men squatting on their heels in the gloom of the bunker. "Them lads of mine have lived all their lives in the outdoors, the moors, the hills, the fields. What do you think years behind the wire in the bag would do to them? Besides," his voice rose in determination, "as long as we hold here we can stop this battery from firing at the Navy boys."

"I see," said the Snotty tight-lipped, knowing now that the Laird's words had sealed all their fates.

The Laird opened his mouth to say something to comfort him; then

changed his mind. They lapsed into silence and the Laird occupied himself with his own thoughts once again. He hadn't told the boy the whole truth of course. It wasn't just the guns – it was the massacred Commando. He didn't want to get back to England and start the task of trying to rebuild it with new men. Three years of war had worn him out; he could not face the task of turning green callow youths from the recruiting offices into hardened men. Besides, there were the wives and children of the men who had died left behind on his estate at Dearth. If he survived the war, he would have to face them on every day that dawned and know in his heart that he had been responsible for their men's death. He couldn't stand that prospect.

"Sir." It was Curtis, standing look-out.

"Yes?"

"Yon Jerries are coming, sir."

Wearily the survivors of No. 7 Commando rose to their feet and manned the slits.

The Laird peered out. A thin, thoughtful line of men in camouflaged uniforms were walking slowly across the yellow, cropped grass towards the turret, holding their weapons at the port, their eyes fixed on the ground, as if they had lost something. "SS, lads," he announced.

"Och, Laird," Menzies snarled. "Dinna fash yersen about them slopeheads. We can tackle them laddies with one hand tied behind our backs."

"Ye ken, Laird," Curtis added, "we're behind a bluidy foot of concrete. All them laddies have is a wee bit o' grass in front of them."

The Laird's lean face lit up. "Yer right enough there, Jock! Come on, lads. Let's show em what the bash-on boys of Seventh Commando can do!" He took careful aim with his rifle and fired.

"Keep moving," von Dodenburg shouted above the noisy crackle of fire which had erupted from the turret. "Keep moving!"

One or two of the Hitler Youth volunteers who had dropped to the parched yellow grass got to their feet and rejoined the line.

"That's right, boys," von Dodenburg said approvingly. "As long as you're moving you're safe." A slug whined through the air close by him and his voice faltered for a moment. "Once they've got you stopped, you make a nice juicy target for them. Keep moving now!" He quickened the pace. If the Tommies had a machine-gun in the turret, they'd open up with it any moment

now and that would be the end of his advance; they had to be close enough to the turret before that happened to be able to cover Schulze and Matz in the Mark IV when it appeared on the scene.

"At the double!" he yelled suddenly, as he spotted the long dark barrel protruding from one of the slits.

The company broke into an awkward trot. The enemy machine-gun opened up almost without warning. A man next to von Dodenburg swayed crazily, screaming through the bright arc of blood gushing from his throat. Von Dodenburg felt it soak his shoulder, wet and hot.

"Come on, you cowards!" von Dodenburg screamed desperately. "Heaven, arse and twine, keep going!"

But already men were flinging themselves down everywhere in the shelter of a shallow ditch, fifty metres away from the turret, sobbing and screaming with fear, rage, exhaustion as they hit the ground.

"Oh, you shitty bastards!" von Dodenburg cursed as he saw that the company was bogging down, realising that there was nothing he could do about it. He slumped down with the rest, defeated, knowing that now Schulze and Matz would have to take their chance alone.

Schulze crawled cautiously back to the Mark IV hidden by the slight rise and rejoined Matz who was ecstatically smoking a looted Canadian cigarette.

"Shit, Schulze," he exclaimed, taking the tiny stub of the cigarette out of his mouth, "to have a smoke of this stuff is almost as good as shooting your load. We're in the wrong shitty army – "

"Trap!" Schulze cut him short angrily. "The CO didn't make it. Those wet-tails of his got within fifty metres and then they wet their knickers. They dived for cover."

Matz savoured the last of the cigarette taken from one of the dead Canadian tankers and said, “So?”

"So we've got to face up to that crapping great cannon of theirs on our own lonesome."

Matz nodded. He knew what Schulze meant. When the CO had planned the attack he had hoped that the infantry might have put the big gun out of commission so that the Mark IV could complete the destruction of the bunker in safety. He lowered the tiny stub of cigarette to the ground and placed his boot on it gently. He breathed two streams of blue smoke out of his nostrils. "What we gonna do then, Schulze?"

"We'll come in from the right flank over there, firing as soon as we cross the top of the ridge."

"Why don't you send them a shitting printed invitation that we're coming? They'll spot us straight away."

"Exactly, you miserable piece of ape shit. That's what I want them to do. I want them to have us fixed as being over here. Once they've spotted us, we'll do a quick retreat, provided that you can sort out reverse gear in time, being the dum-dum that you are."

"I resent that," Matz said hotly. Schulze told him what he could do with his resentment and Matz grinned. "I can't, Schulze. I've already got a double-decker bus up there."

"Then we make smoke, blinding the buck-teethed buggers and go like a bat out of hell for their rear into the blind ground. Have you got it?"

"Got it!" Matz answered easily. "Should I carve a couple of crosses for our graves now with my sabre?"

“I'll carve a cross on your ugly mug in a minute. We can do it all right with a bit of luck and provided that you're nifty enough with that joystick of yours. All right, let's roll 'em! And you," he added to the corporal standing on the turret, his face deathly pale and streaked with black, congealed blood. "Fire that popgun of yours as soon as we hit that rise. I'm in charge of the smoke launchers. All right, move it!"

"Jerry tank!" the Snotty yelled in sudden fear as the Mark IV breasted the rise to their right, showering soil and sods of grass everywhere.

"On that bloody gun – gildy!” the Laird reacted immediately, "Curtis, Menzies!"

The men needed no urging. A frenzy of fumbling. The great cannon swung round. Two hundred yards away the tank was rolling down the rise, its cannon already in action.

Curtis flung himself in the gun-layer's seat. There was no time to sight the cannon. The Mark IV was only a hundred and fifty yards away. He snatched crazily at the firing lever. The monstrous weapon erupted with a huge roar. Hot blast whipped their tired faces. The turret flooded with yellow smoke. The Laird gasped as his lungs filled with the acrid blast and staggered to the nearest slit. Where the tank had been a moment before there was a sudden hole of brown steaming earth, and beyond it, thick clouds of white smoke rising swiftly from the ground.

"Did we get it?" the Snotty asked excitedly, staggering over to him, his fear replaced by the thrill of combat.

The Laird rubbed his reddened eyes wearily. "I don't rightly know, laddie, but it looks like it... All right?" he commanded, his voice firm again, "keep a weather-eye on that spot, Curtis and Menzies. I don't want no more of them buggers creeping up on us like, that. 'Cos once they've got under the range of that popgun of yours, they've got us by the short arm. With them tank guns, they'll take us apart bit by bit and there's bugger all we'll be able to do about it. So keep yer eyes skinned!"

"Shit on the shingle," Matz cursed, his voice thin and seeming very far away. "Never soddingly well do anything like that to me again, Schulze, or I'll stick that bit of tin you wear round yer neck right up your arse – sideways!" Savagely he rammed home yet another gear and the tank rattled across the uneven ground as if the devil himself were after it.

Schulze slapped his ear. He had hardly been able to make out Matz's words, deafened by the roar of the great shell that had shaken the tank, as if it had been a child's tin toy. Next to him the gunner, who had forgotten to open his mouth when the blast had engulfed him, was bleeding from both nose and ears.

Schulze poked his head cautiously above the turret and tried to make out their position in. the white smoke which swirled all around them like one of the thick sea fogs of his native Hamburg.

"Well?" Matz's voice inquired over the radio.

"Don't worry me, monkey turd. Keep your foot down on the gas pedal, that's all, and give her all the juice you've got."

"Look out, sir," the corporal cried urgently.

"What? Oh Christ on a crutch, we're running out of smoke!" A sudden breeze had come in from the sea and was dispersing the fog to their right; they were heading for the cleared patch at thirty kilometres an hour. "Matz, watch it!"

But the little one-legged driver had already spotted the danger. Frantically he jerked at the left-hand tiller bar to pull the tank round and out of danger. But it was too late. They were already in the open, clearly outlined in the brilliant August sunshine which had suddenly flooded the cliff top.

"Oh Mama," Schulze moaned to no one in particular, as the great gun began to swing towards them, "here's where we start looking at the tatties

from below!”

“In the name of sweet Jesus, get that big bitch round, will yer?" the Laird cried hysterically, as Curtis and Menzies heaved the cannon round. "Come on, the rest of you, don't stand there like spare dildos in a convent, lend a sodding hand.”

Curtis flung himself into the gun-layer's seat and left the pushing to the rest. Menzies freed one hand and snapped up the breech lever. "Away ye go, Jock!" he yelled as the gun reached its maximum traverse.

Curtis thrust his eye against the rubber eye-piece. The Mark IV leapt into view, bisected neatly by the graduated line of the sight. "I'm going to fire," he yelled and grabbed for the firing lever. In another second the Mark IV would have vanished into the blind ground.

"Fire, for God's sake!" the Laird screamed in fearful exasperation. "Fire!" Curtis jerked back the lever. Once again the big gun roared into life. Instinctively the Laird blinked. When he opened his eyes again a fraction of a second later, he caught a glimpse of the dark whirling mass of the shell heading straight out to sea and the disappearing metal rump of the Mark IV scuttling for the dead ground.

Schulze took over the 75mm personally, as the Mark IV came to a halt some fifty metres behind and to the right of the silent turret. “You see, greenbeak,” he lectured the young corporal. as he settled himself comfortably in the gunner's seat, “this is where the real expert comes in. For a job like this, you've got to treat yer gun like yer'd treat a virgin – though I suppose you wouldn't even know how to do that. Soft, gentle, trying not to hurt her, but using a bit of cunning to get her to roll over and open her pearly gates for yer, just as we're going to get that lot over there to open their legs for us." He fondled the gun lovingly.

"Aw for Chrissake," Matz complained from below. "I won't be able to get out of the driving seat if yer go on talking like that I'll be wedged in here. What is this – a war or a sodding session at Rosi-Rosi's knocking shop?"

Schulze swung the turret round until the long, hooded 75mm was sighted directly on the turret's nearest slit. His big hand clutched at the firing bar. He took a deep breath and then yelled, using all the English he knew, "All right, Tommies, it's a long way to Tipperary! And here you go!"

Curtis was blinded by the first shell. He reeled back from the observation slit, his face a myriad of bleeding cuts, as if someone had rubbed it with a wire pan cleaner. Apologetically he said: "I'm sorry, Laird. But I think yon shell did fer mah eyes. I cannae see." Then as the turret was struck a second time and the gloomy, wildly shaking room was filled with thick choking concrete dust, he sat down carefully in the corner and politely but determinedly refused to be touched.

Next to him, Menzies, his pal, pressed his broad back against the heeling wall and began softly saying psalms.

The terrible pounding continued. After a while the Snotty went mad. At first it was a reserved, English form of madness, and consisted of the boy placing his face in his hands and sobbing quietly. But as that monstrous, close-ranged battering went on and on, he began to scream.

The Laird hit him across the face, but the nerve-racking screaming went on. Then the Snotty began to chew his tongue, his eyeballs turned back in his head with only a bit of the white showing, the saliva running down his dust-coated contorted face was tinged pink with blood.

"Grab hold of him!" the Laird commanded.

A couple of the commandos seized the boy's arms. The Laird drew his skean dhu, and prising open the Snotty's jaw, slid in the little blade to prevent him biting off his tongue. The trick worked. The boy started to grind his teeth on the steel blade, his body still twitching convulsively, but his cries becoming weaker and weaker until they had fallen to a soft whimper, large tears trickling down his cheeks. The Laird cradled the boy's face in his arms, muttering softly to him all the time until he closed his eyes and died.

"Will the buck-toothed bastards never give up?" cried Matz from below. "My head's going like a shitty ding-dong bell with the noise. And look at the place, it looks as if somebody has worked it over with a power-shovel!"

Schulze nodded. He had destroyed every slit in front of him and the concrete of the turret was so deeply gouged and scarred with shell-fire that there was little trace of its original shape left. "They must be shittingly well off their heads to stand that kind of punishment," he agreed and wiped the dripping sweat from his brow. His face burned from the August sun and the terrific heat of the open turret. He threw a glance at Number One Company sprawled in the parched grass waiting for the turret to surrender. "All the same, the CO's not going to risk those greenbeaks in a direct attack, Matz,"

he explained. "It's up to us to make the Tommies give in."

"Yeah, it's allus the old heads who get the dirty work."

With a sigh, Schulze stowed new shells in the ready bins and swung himself behind the red-hot gun once more. "All right, you little currant-crapper," he said, "you'd better take another aspirin for that turnip of yours. Here we go again." He jerked the lever and the gun roared into violent life.

"Great God and all his shiny triangles," Matz cursed, his hands pressed tightly over his bleeding ears, "how long is this going to go on for?"

The Laird was asking himself the same question as the terrible pounding began again. He looked around the shaking, dust-filled gloom of the turret and knew that his men were at the end of their tether. All of them had sunk into a strange lethargy, their eyes wide and staring, the only sign of the tremendous strain they were under, the nervous tics of their dust-coated faces. In between shells the silence of the turret was only broken by Menzies' low murmur as he repeated over and over again, "The Lord is my shepherd …"

Slowly the Laird levered himself up against the trembling wall and said in a voice that he hardly recognised as his own, "Lads, I... I think we've… had it..."

It seemed an age before the men reacted. Then slowly. they turned their eyes in his direction, and looked at him in dumb expectation. "Lads, do we surrender?"

It seemed an age before they reacted. Then, one by one, they shook their heads.

The Laird smiled slowly and gravely. "Thank you, lads," he croaked. He raised his voice. "On your feet. Come on, you bunch of pregnant penguins, get them fingers out of your orifices – move! All right. Them sodding Jerries are not going to take us alive – we're the Seventh Commando; remember? The bash-on boys!" There was iron in his voice now. "Not a ruddy lot of square-bashing squaddies. Come on now, let's see a bit of swank there. You, Murdock, get that tunic of yours buttoned up. Gilchrist, how often have I told yer, you idle man, that your webbing belt's got to be over yer blouse. Now get it soddingly well seen to, or yer'll be on a fizzer before yer knows what hits yer. At the double, man!"

With fingers that felt as thick as pork sausages, the survivors adjusted their uniforms, pulling down their blouses and canvas gaiters, buttoning up their jackets, tugging at their stocking caps. It was as though they imagined

they would hear the tremendous voice of Black Jack, the Commando's Regimental Sergeant Major, now long dead and floating face downwards in the English Channel, crying: "All right, right-markers, get on parade!" and they would tense, legs apart, arms rigid down behind their backs, ready to march on as soon as the next command came: "Seventh Commando. Seventh Commando, get on PARADE!"

But now the last command they would ever receive was not to get on parade, but to die. The Laird's lips were red against his dusty face as he snarled, "All right, what are yer waiting for – fix bayonets!"

There was a frenzy of fumbling. The Laird turned and walked smartly down the dark littered corridor, turned the steel catches on the door, his head full of the stirring music of the pipes. The men crowded around him, their bayonets glinting in the faint light.

"Now!" the Laird yelled, raising his skean dhu high in the air.

"Oh, my holy Christ!" Schulze breathed in awe, as they came stumbling out into the bright sunshine, blinded by the sudden light, but bayonets at the ready, led by a little runt of an officer, dressed in an absurd skirt which dangled around his skinny knees. The corporal raised his Schmeisser. Hastily Schulze pushed it to one side. "Knock it off," he cried angrily.

"Hold your fire!" bellowed von Dodenburg, only fifty metres away, as his men raised their weapons too. "Hold your fire, I say!" his eyes filled with awed respect at these filthy apparitions who had once been men, staggering wearily towards them.

But Sergeant-Major Metzger, aware that he must take some part in the battle for Dieppe before it was too late if he were to retain his position as senior NCO of SS Battalion Wotan, was not listening to such orders. Standing at the back of the truck which had brought him to the scene of the action and sure he was in full view of the Vulture, coming up with the rest of the Battalion, he pressed the trigger of his Schmeisser. At that range he could not miss.

"Stop that, Metzger!" cried von Dodenburg. "For God's sake –" the words died on his lips for it was already too late. All of the English were writhing in their death throes on the ground save the lone figure in the kilt who staggered another few paces before he took the Butcher's last burst in his stomach. The thin knees beneath the over-long kilt gave way and he dropped to the ground. The Laird of Abernockie and Dearth, once known as Foxy

Fergus, was dead at last. When von Dodenburg turned his body over, he was surprised to see the dead Englishman was smiling.

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It was five o'clock, exactly forty minutes later. Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt telephoned the Führer's HQ. His message was short and brutal in its simplicity: "Mein Führer, no armed Englishman remains on the Continent!"

CHAPTER 26

The setting sun was beginning to slip into the sea. From the land the hard black shadows were stealing in at last to hide the terrible beach. Yet for a few more minutes the setting sun still bathed that scene of death and destruction in its crimson light.

Field Marshal von Rundstedt and his staff officers, standing on the shattered, battle-littered promenade, surveyed it in a profound silence broken only by the soft whimpering of the last of the Canadian wounded. Hardened, professional soldiers as they were – many of them veterans of the mass slaughters of the Western Front in the First War – they were awed and impressed by the sheer degree of the massacre.

Nothing had escaped the defenders' withering fire – neither man nor machine. Everywhere the British dead lay, their big boots sticking upwards or face downwards in the warm sand among the shattered tanks and landing craft – the whole beach as far as the eye could see seemed carpeted with their khaki-clad bodies. And everything was so dreadfully still. Nothing stirred except the sand flies buzzing busily above the dead and the pathetic, wilted hedge-roses which some of the Canadians had plucked to stick in their helmets as they marched so bravely to their boats only a few short hours before.

Field Marshal von Rundstedt took his eyes from that barren, blasted landscape and said in an old and very tired voice, "Gentlemen, we cannot consider the operation at Dieppe a local raid. The expenditure in men and material was too great for that." Wearily he pointed his marshal's baton, given to him personally by Hitler, at one of the shattered Churchills. "One does not sacrifice twenty or thirty of one's most modern tanks for a raid." There was a low murmur of agreement from his officers. "No matter. In our propaganda statements we must now emphasise that the enemy believed he could seize a bridgehead here at Dieppe and then use the good port facilities for bringing up and landing in succession the floating and operational reserves. We shall call it a failed attempt at the Second Front. Is that understood, gentlemen?"

"Understood, Excellency."

For a few moments the aged Field Marshal was silent, sunk in his own thoughts. His watery gaze fell on a little group of Tommies caught by a burst

of fire in the act of setting up a machine-gun. One was still propped up behind his Bren gun by the sand, peering along the barrel, his face set in an eloquent, passionate look of devotion to duty, even in death, with the sand flies crawling over the glassy balls of his eyes. Next to him lay the loader with the curved magazine clutched in his claw of a hand, his lips drawn back in a grim smile that gave his dead face a triumphant look.

"It was an amateurish operation," he whispered drily to himself. "One would think they wanted it to fail right from the start." He shivered.

"Is anything the matter, Excellency?" his chief aide inquired anxiously.

"No, Heinz, it's nothing." He smiled thinly, his eyes almost disappearing into the mass of wrinkles around his faded eyes. "A louse must have run over my liver. But I will tell you this, gentlemen," he raised his thin voice so that they could all hear, "they will not do it like this again. And they will come again, believe you me." He took a last look at the still sea, momentarily flushed a dramatic crimson by the dying sun, and turned to go without another word. His staff officers, suddenly depressed and apprehensive, filed after him to the waiting Horch.

***

"All right, it's all clear," Schulze whispered, as the staff car with its ancient passenger drove away and the beach was left to the dead, "he's gone, Matzi."

Matz, his face still streaked with the sweat of battle and dirt, limped out of the deepening shadows towards his waiting mate. "Who was it?"

"Rundstedt, I think."

"He had a face like forty days' rain. You'd think he'd be happy. After all he's just won another victory. It's a bit more to put him in the history books one day."

Schulze shrugged. "Victory, do you call it?" He waxed a big paw at. the shattered landscape and the waxen faces of the dead.

Matz nodded slowly. Even he was awed by the sight of the thousands of dead Canadians, lying stiff, still and abandoned on that beach. His voice was low as he said, "Aw come on, Schulze, let's shitting well get on with it."

In silence, with Matz limping a little behind Schulze's massive bulk, they began to explore that dreadful strand, searching each Service Corps vehicle carefully for what they hoped to find.

"Where there's a damned Scot, there's damn fine Scotch whisky," Schulze had lectured Matz after the Butcher had mown down the little runt of a Tommy in his ragged skirt and they had realised that he was a Scot, "and it's up to Mrs Schulze's little boy to find it." Now the grim sight of the thousands of dead men littering the beach made him regret his decision. Nevertheless he had promised Major von Dodenburg that the depressed, exhausted survivors of the First Company would have their whisky this night before, "Those thieving bastards of base stallions – kitchen-bulls, bone-menders, shit-shovellers and head-hunters – got their flippers on the loot."

Thus, while the Mark IV rattled along the promenade parallel with them ready to transport back the loot to the waiting youngsters of the First, they combed the beach wordlessly, depressed, trying to avoid looking at those countless, sightless eyes, which somehow seemed filled with reproach at this intrusion.

Finally they found what they sought – an amphibious Jeep, bearing the green and white sign of the Service Corps, its axle wrecked, its driver slumped with his bloody head against the shattered windscreen, but with the wooden crates in its back still intact.

"Sabre!" Schulze snapped laconically. Matz gave him his SS dagger. Wordlessly Schulze dug his blade under the wooden lid and heaved. It came away to reveal the bottles stacked neatly in their piles to straw.

"Whisky," Matz said without triumph.

Schulze nodded and putting his thumb and forefinger in his mouth, whistled shrilly. It was the signal for the corporal to halt the tank. With the practised ease of someone who had spent his youth heaving hundredweight sacks of cement at Hamburg's docks, he thrust a case of the whisky into Matz's waiting hands.

Matz set off towards the waiting Mark IV. Far away Schulze could hear the steady tramp of heavy boots. Military police patrol, he told himself, and swung two cases on each shoulder. He caught up with Matz just as he clambered up the sea wall to the tank waiting in the deepening shadows. "Here," he grunted and heaved the four cases on to the tank's deck. "Get that stowed. The head-hunters are on their way!"

The corporal thrust the cases down the turret into the eager hands of the new driver. Finally he said, "what about that one?" He indicated the case still on Matz's shoulder.

Schulze shook his head. "We're keeping that one for ourselves. Now be

off with you, back to those thirsty greenbeaks before the head-hunters nab you for looting – and tell the CO he's just granted us two days' special leave in Dieppe for services rendered."

The corporal opened his mouth to protest; then he changed his mind. Hurriedly he disappeared into the turret and the tank rattled away into the growing darkness. Matz, still clutching the case of whisky in his hands, waited till the roar of its motors had died away, then asked: "And what was that in aid of, Schulze?"

Schulze took the case from him and deposited it on his own big shoulder. "Listen carefully, wet-fart, I'm going to explain it simple to you. This whisky's worth a fortune, ain't it?"

Matz nodded.

"So what is Mrs Schulze's little boy gonna do with it?"

"He's gonna flog it on the black market," Matz replied. "I know that, you dum-dum. But what are yer gonna do with the green moss you'll get for it?"

"We'll join the Resistance," Schulze announced and slipped the big thumb of his free hand between two of his dirty fingers in an explicitly obscene gesture.

Matz's wicked little eyes sparkled for the first time since they had first seen that terrible beach. "You mean Rosi-Rosi's?"

"Right in one, bird-brain. With the Marie we'll get for this firewater, we'll hire the whole shiny place for the next forty-eight hours. Just for me and you, Matzi."

"Holy strawstack," Matz breathed, "what a way to go!"

Schulze's big face hardened for a moment, but only for a moment. "Yer know what they say, Matzi," he said seriously, throwing a last glance at the myriad dead now disappearing into the black clutch of the night, "war's hell, but peacetime –"

"Will shittingly well kill yer!" bellowed Matz. When the MP patrol swung stolidly round the corner, they were already running wildly up the promenade towards the brothel, laughing like crazy men.

– THE END –

DEVIL'S SHIELD

DOGS OF WAR – VOLUME TWO

by Leo Kessler

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Blow the bugle, beat the drum!
Clear the street, here comes the Wo-tan!
Steel is our weapon
To hew through bone.
Blood our purpose,
Wotan hold close.
For Death is our Destiny.

Marching Song of SS Battle Group Wotan, Autumn 1944.

In the grim autumn of 1944, the fifth year of the war, Colonel von Dodenburg's SS Battle Group Wotan had become the Führer's Fire Brigade', the elite unit of the German Wehrmacht, to be thrown into any battle as a last desperate measure to redress the balance. Its men, teenage veterans who had grown savage and brutal on the battlefields of half Europe, owed no loyalty to their nation, their Führer or their state. Their sole loyalty was to their comrades, their beloved commander and their very weapons.

Dedicated to death, knowing that their dreaded silver death's head cap badge condemned them as war criminals, they felt no fear, fighting savagely against overwhelming odds for a cause already long lost. Thus, in the grey September of that year, Colonel von Dodenburg's black-uniformed troopers came to Aachen, Germany's Holy City, *with the Führer's order to hold it ringing in their ears. SS Battle Group Wotan was fighting on German soil at last!*

Leo Kessler. Trier, Germany, 1974.

BOOK I – THE HOLY CITY

'This goddam Catholic Aachen is Charlemagne's city: the heartland of Germany. Not National Socialist Germany, but all Germany... Aachen must remain German!'

SS Police General 'Devil' Donner to Colonel von Dodenburg, September 1944.

CHAPTER 1

'Freeze!'

Fearfully the little reconnaissance patrol dropped into the damp grass at the river's edge, weapons gripped tightly in suddenly sweating hands, and stared hard into the little valley beyond.

The September sun was going down now. Long black shadows were sliding into the valley from the east. The silence was thick and unnatural, heavy with menace. Even the persistent rumble of the artillery to the west seemed to have vanished.

Staff Sergeant Warner Holzinger, the patrol leader, who had rapped out the order, raised himself cautiously on one knee and stared at the wrecked bridge which led across the border river and into the valley. The Krauts had destroyed it only hours before. They had heard the thick crump of the explosion distinctly as they had felt their way carefully behind the retreating Krauts. That he knew for certain. What he didn't know was whether they were now hidden up on the darkening heights, waiting for his little patrol from the US 5th Armored Division to cross into their territory before beginning the slaughter.

'What do you think, Sarge?' Corporal Driver asked as he crouched next to him, grease-gun at the ready. 'That stream sure looks deep. Hell, the whole goddam place gives me the creeps! Shall we high tail it out of here?'

Sergeant Holzinger licked his scummed, cracked lips, 'Listen, fellers,' he whispered, 'You know the CO's screaming for info. He'll screw us real hard if we goof off now. We've got to check the place out. You know that, don't you?' He looked hopefully around the little patrol's worn unshaven faces. But his men avoided his eyes. Holzinger knew they were as scared as he was. Still they weren't noncoms. They didn't have to make the goddam decisions. He did.

'Okay then,' he commanded, raising his voice. 'This is the deal. I'm going to check the creek out. Frenchie,' he nodded to their French guide. 'You give me cover. Once we're across, the rest of you guys follow. And get the lead out of yer asses. I don't want the Krauts catching you in mid-stream with yer skivvies down. Get me?'

Raising his .30 carbine to his chest, the young American sergeant

stepped cautiously into the fast-flowing border stream. Slowly and carefully he started to wade into it, followed by a tense, half-crouched Frenchie. The icy water reached up to his knees. Then his thighs. He was half way across now. Still no sudden, high-pitched burst of MG fire from the other side. Nothing, just a faint icy wind heralding the night.

Holzinger struggled on, fighting the current and the slippery stones underfoot. The water began to recede. It fell to the level of his rubber-soled combat boots. With a last grunt, he tugged his right foot clear and stepped on to the muddy bank – 'a historic moment,' the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper was going to call it later –carbine pressed tightly against his hip, ready for trouble. But still there was no sign of the Germans. Sergeant Holzinger wasted no further time. He spread the fingers of his hand out on the crown of his helmet – the infantry signal for 'rally on me' – and started up the steep slope, followed by a still tense Frenchie. Moments later the rest of the recon patrol had joined him and, like the combat veterans they were, had spread out in the attack formation, advancing cautiously up the darkening hillside to what looked like a cluster of poor, rundown farm buildings.

But their caution was unnecessary. When they reached them, they found them empty, obviously hastily abandoned by the fleeing Germans only hours before. They found more too. They weren't farm buildings, but cunningly camouflaged bunkers, their walls behind the rotten wooden slats thick slabs of ferro-concrete

'Jeez, Sarge,' Driver breathed, running his flashlight around the dripping grey walls, unbroken save for the gun slits. 'You know what this place is?' Holzinger shook his head, as puzzled by his discovery as the rest of the recon platoon.

'It's the Siegfried Line. We've gone and penetrated the goddam Kraut Siegfried Line!'

Holzinger's mouth dropped open as he absorbed the information. 'Brother,' he exclaimed suddenly, his face lighting up, 'I think you're goddam right! Wait till the CO hears this!'

In the cold gloom of the bunker, heavy with the stench of German soldiers' black tobacco and unwashed bodies, they grinned jubilantly at each other. But Holzinger knew there was no further time to be wasted. He pulled the walkie-talkie from Private Locke's shoulder and pressed the speech switch.

'Hello Sunray One,' he called urgently, 'Hello Sunray One. Charlie One

here... Do you read me? Sunray One, do you read me? Over.'

The little instrument crackled into life and the CO's voice came through distinctly from his forward CP on the Luxembourg side of the border. 'Hello Charlie One... hello Charlie One, reading you loud and clear. Over!'

Sergeant Holzinger hesitated, aware suddenly of the significance of the message he would now give through. He cleared his throat. 'Hello Sunray.. hello Sunray. Charlie One speaking. Time eighteen zero fire hours, eleven September forty-four.' He coughed. 'Charlie Patrol has just crossed into Germany north east of Stalzemburg. We have penetrated Objective A. No opposition. Positions abandoned by the enemy. Over!' For a long moment there was silence, broken only by the static and the tense breathing of the men crowded round Holzinger in the centre of the German bunker. Then the CO's voice came through loud and excited, radio procedure thrown to the wind.

'Holzinger, you goddam lucky sonuvabitch! You've just become the first goddam enemy soldier in history to cross into Kraut territory since the days of that frog Napoleon!' The CO gasped for breath. 'Now get your butts back on over here, while you've still gotten them in one piece. I want you to tell this particular bit of info to the commanding general personally! Hot shit, Holzinger, he's gonna be tickled pink that it was his division of the whole goddam Allied Army which was the first to penetrate into Kraut country. Now move it! Over and out.'

'Roger and out,' Holzinger snapped, thrusting the walkie-talkie into Locke's hands.

The sergeant needed no further urging to get out of the bunker and back to their White scout car hidden in some pines on the Luxembourg side of the Our.

'Okay guys,' he announced. 'Appears we've gone and made history or something. Now let's get the hell out of here – this place is colder than a well-digger's ass. And I just don't trust them Krauts.'

As the Amis scrambled down the hillside, slipping on the suddenly dew-soaked grass in their haste to get back to their White before the sinister little valley was completely dark, the little bespectacled signaller rose from his hiding place. He breathed out hard with relief and wiped the sweat off his dirty, earth-stained brow with the sleeve of his tattered grey uniform jacket. He would have dearly loved to have had a smoke. But he knew there was no time and his hands were trembling like leaves as it was. He would not have

been able to hold one of the Wehrmacht issue cancer sticks. Besides he didn't have one. He had smoked his last one after Lieutenant Rausch had ordered him to stay behind and report while he withdrew the rest of their decimated, demoralised battalion. Trying to control his trembling, he whirled the handle of the field telephone.

Cupping his hand over the mouthpiece, as if he were afraid that the Amis now wading through the stream might hear him, he whispered, 'Can you hear me, sir?'

'Of course, I can hear, you four-eyed shithouse,' Lieutenant Rausch's familiar, schnapps-thickened voice answered. 'I might not be altogether right in the head for not getting out of the stubble hoppers, but I'm not shitty well deaf. Get on with it, Meier, what have you to report?'

'Beg obediently to report,' the little signaller began, using the traditional Army formula for addressing an officer.

But Rausch cut him short with a, 'Go shit in the wind, man! What did you see?'

'Ami panzer troops, Lieutenant. Just one armoured car. But I could hear the noise of a lot of tracked vehicles on the other side of the river. They're out there in force, sir. Now can I come back?'

Rausch did not answer his plea for a moment. Instead the signaller, who had been with the officer ever since they had started the long, bloody, panic-stricken retreat from France at the beginning of August, heard his CO sigh heavily as if he were weighed down with the cares of the Führer himself.

Then Rausch said wearily, 'Well, Meier, you pale-faced pineapple-shitter, you know what this means, don't you?'

Meier, who knew that the CO meant the expression to be regarded as a form of endearment, was not offended.

'No, sir, what does it mean?'

'It means, you horned ox, that tonight or tomorrow morning, those sodding Amis will start the attack on Aachen and that by tomorrow night you and I will be running for our precious lives once more.' The CO's voice dropped almost to a whisper. 'The dream's over, Meier. The glorious Greater German Wehrmacht is beaten at last.'

CHAPTER 2

'Will you just take a look, sir, at those rotten currant-crappers,' Schulze groaned, as the line of infantry holding the heights broke finally and began to run. 'The whole shitty lot of stubble hoppers are beating it.' He spat contemptuously and looked at his young blond CO perched next to him on the deck of the Royal Tiger. 'What the hell are we going to do with a bunch of wet sacks like that, sir? I ask you.'

Colonel von Dodenburg, the commander of SS Battle Group Wotan, drawn up in readiness in the thick, fragrant pine wood, five kilometres west of Aachen, took his eyes off the ragged line of panic-stricken infantry streaming across the plain towards them. An officer was unsuccessfully trying to hold them back. The guns of the US VII Corps were beginning to plaster them. Soon the enemy Jabos, fighter planes used as dive bombers, would add weight to the softening up prior to an all-out Ami attack on the old Imperial City.

'Wet sacks, did I hear you say, Sergeant-Major Schulze?' he queried calmly, as if he were watching a movie and not the breakdown of the German line in front of Aachen. 'I'm a little surprised at you – a senior NCO in the Armed SS's most elite formation – saying such a thing.'

The big-shouldered, ex-Hamburg docker, who had served with von Dodenburg on every European front since the Wotan's earliest days, made an obscene gesture, thrusting his thumb between his two big fingers.

'That's what I think of those African warthogs out there, sir,' he said contemptuously.

The handsome, aristocratic colonel, clad in a black leather jacket, devoid of any decoration save the gleaming black and white enamel of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross with palms and jewels, smiled. But there was no answering warmth in his hard blue eyes. 'Those – er – African warthogs as you describe them, my dear Schulze, are German soldiers. The same men who marched to Moscow, conquered half of Europe, are fighting against a world in arms. All they are doing is what I believe our leaders call so delicately, a 'correction of the front'. Tut, tut, Schulze, how can you say such things about the Führer's beloved stubble hoppers?'

'And if I may humbly make the observation, Colonel – the Colonel is a

cynic, sir.'

Von Dodenburg's reply was drowned by the screech of the Ami Jabos streaking in at 500 kilometres per hour. Angry purple lights crackled along the length of their wings. The fleeing stubble hoppers scattered wildly. The vicious red and white tracer sliced yawning cavities in their ranks. Men went down everywhere, arms flailing, screaming as the Ami Lightnings swooped high into the grey September sky, twisting and turning exuberantly at the success of their sudden strike.

Still the rest of the retreating stubble hoppers came on, stamping over the bodies of their dead and dying comrades, pressing them deeper into the mud, ignoring their fervent pleas in their frantic attempt to escape.

'Stand by!' Colonel von Dodenburg yelled, swinging round to check that the black-clad crews with the gleaming SS runes and death's head on their collars were alert and ready.

Lightly he dropped off the tank's deck and pushed his way through the bushes into the open. Feet spread apart, hands clasped on his hips, apparently oblivious to the Ami artillery barrage, he waited for the fugitives to reach their positions.

'Great crap on the Christmas Tree,' Schulze groaned. 'Here we fucking well go again!'

Nevertheless he followed his CO into the open, signalling the crews of the leading Tigers to join him. Now they formed a long silent line, machine-pistols unslung and at the ready, as the first of the stubble hoppers came running towards them, chests heaving violently, helmets and rifles gone, one thought uppermost in their panic-numbed minds – escape 1 A boy drew level with them. His eyes were wide with fear, his hair tousled and disordered, his breath coming in short, leaden-lunged gasps.

'Stop!' von Dodenburg commanded.

The boy did not hear him. He blundered on, hands stretched in front of him like a blind man.

'Schulze!' von Dodenburg bellowed without turning round.

The big Hamburger thrust out his foot. The boy stumbled over it and fell full length. Schulze kicked him in the side of the head. He sprawled unconscious on the ground. Now the fugitives were everywhere, trying to break through the line of grim-faced, black-clad SS men.

'The Amis,' they gasped and wheezed. 'The Amis – they're coming... on the other side of the hill.'

'Stop them von Dodenburg thundered, still not taking his eyes off the heights over which the first Amis were expected at any moment.

The black-clad SS men raised their butts and drove them into the faces and bodies of the panic-stricken stubble hoppers.

'Hey, give over,' a fat-faced stubble hopper with grey hair shouted. 'We're German just like. –' The words died abruptly in a mouthful of hot blood and shattered teeth. He staggered back, clutching his ruined mouth, his eyes wide and damp-gleaming with shocked outrage and pain. A young SS soldier slammed his nailed boot into the man's crotch. The SS man did not even look down. He stepped over the fallen stubble hopper, writhing in agony in the mud, and crashed his butt into the next one's face.

In a matter of moments the rout had been stopped and the surviving stubble hoppers were standing there, crestfallen, their bleeding, battered faces staring down at their comrades lying moaning in the mud.

As the first Ami Shermans breasted the hill with the infantry crowded behind them in tight frightened tails, Schulze bellowed: 'All right, you perverted banana suckers, get in that ditch! And don't a one of you dare to stir out of it till I tell you to.' He raised his ham-like right fist. 'Because if you do, you're gonna get a knuckle sandwich which will keep you from getting hungry for a month of Sundays. Now come on, you jam-shitting stubble hoppers – move it!'

They needed no urging. Like a pack of frightened mice they scurried for the cover of the rain-filled drainage ditch, blocked by the bloated body of a dead cow, lying there with its legs sticking upwards like a tethered balloon. The SS men followed, running to their sixty-ton steel monsters. The long hooded cannon swung round. Hatch covers were dropped. The twin air-cooled machine guns focused on the Ami infantry.

The enemy barrage covering the advancing Shermans crept closer and closer. Two hundred metres. One fifty. One hundred metres!

'Stand fast!' von Dodenburg rapped over the command tank's mike. 'Here it comes!'

As the stubble hoppers pressed themselves ever deeper into the mud of the stinking drainage ditch, the enemy barrage descended upon the wood in which the Wotan tanks were hidden with an elemental roar. Tree bursts, von Dodenburg noted automatically. The Amis thought they were faced only by infantry. He smiled coldly in spite of the earth-shaking thunder crack and howl of red-hot slivers of steel striking against the Tiger's metal sides. The

Amis were soon going to be in for an unpleasant surprise.

In the drainage ditch, the stubble hoppers screamed, sobbed and sweated with fear as the shrapnel whizzed over their heads. Meier felt his bowels open. Hot liquid ran down his legs. The air was filled with a disgusting stench.

'Holy God in heaven,' he screamed, 'let it end... please.' The next instant, his wish was granted. A hunk of gleaming metal sliced his head off neatly, sending it rolling to the bottom of the ditch, complete with issue glasses.

Next to him Rausch felt the hot vomit well up into his mouth. While the severed head seemed to watch him with unruffled calm through the glasses, Lieutenant Rausch retched violently.

And then the barrage had moved on, leaving the wood full of fallen branches hanging from the pines like newly severed limbs. The Amis had not spotted them after all. Colonel von Dodenburg did not hesitate. The Amis were completely out in the open.

'What a sight for the gods, Schulze,' he cried enthusiastically, 'a whole Ami battalion lined up as if they were on parade and not a bit of cover within the nearest two hundred metres!' Thrusting back the hatch-cover, sending the shrapnel lying on it flying, he drew out the Very pistol and fired in the same instant.

The red signal flare hissed into the morning sky and hung there for what seemed an age, bathing the battlefield in its unreal, flickering light. Then it started to sink down to earth again. It was the signal that the thirty gunners of Battle Group Wotan had been waiting for ever since they had taken up their positions two hours before. The great 88 mm cannon crashed into action as one. The first Ami company advancing down the slope ran right into the salvo. They disappeared, as if they had been brushed aside by a gigantic hand. Still the tanks came on, attempting vainly to steer their way through the sudden holes and the great piles of khaki-clad dead.

Von Dodenburg, standing upright on the turret of the Royal Tiger, glasses focused on the slaughter, fired the second flare with his free hand. The wood was bathed a sickly green. The gunners reacted at once. They thrust home the AP shells which the signal demanded.

The 88s thundered again. The white blobs sped towards the Shermans, curving slightly and growing faster at every moment. Suddenly the Ami tank-drivers realised they had run into a trap. Desperately they tried to avoid the

armour-piercing shells, but in vain. A couple of Shermans smashed into each other as their drivers panicked. Another swung round in a cloud of mud and pebbles and ploughed into the following infantry, cutting a great swathe through the screaming GIs.

Metal struck metal with a hollow boom. The first Sherman came to an abrupt halt. Its 75-mm gun sank suddenly like the falling head of a dying animal. Another rocked as if in a great storm as it was struck too, and thick white smoke started to pour from its engine. Evil little flames licked the paint off its metal sides. With a roar, the Sherman disappeared in a blinding yellow light. When the SS men looked again, the Ami tank had vanished completely save for one lonely boogie wheel sailing slowly through the air.

But they had no time for the uncanny sights of the battlefield. Most of the cover Shermans had been hit and were burning fiercely now as their terrified crews made frantic attempts to get out of the escape hatches before their 'Ronsons' – the nickname for their highly flammable tanks – exploded for good. They turned their attention to the infantry.

The 7.62 twin machine guns started to chatter. A stream of green and white tracer winged its way towards the Amis. Some threw themselves on to the ground and von Dodenburg could see the bullets striking their defenceless bodies over and over again. Others tried to run and were caught in mid-stride, throwing up their arms in extravagant gestures, spines arched in exquisite agony before they were thrown into the mud by the remorseless stream of lead. But mostly they just cowered there behind the burning Shermans, allowing themselves to be slaughtered.

Then from the other side of the height came the soft plops, followed seconds later by the howl of the Ami 3-inch mortars.

Bombs exploded everywhere in front of the trapped infantry, pouring thick grey smoke, masking the Amis from the German gunners. One by one the machine-guns ceased their deadly chatter. Finally von Dodenburg fired his last flare – the signal for ceasefire.

He grabbed the plug-in mike at the side of command tank's turret and cried urgently, 'To all gunners – cease fire. Do you read me – cease fire now! We've got a long war in front of us, boys, and we'll need all the ammo we can lay our fingers on!'

Standing beside him on the turret, his face blackened by cannon fire, Schulze laughed. 'You can say that again, sir! We'll still be fighting this war when we've all been long in hell.'

Von Dodenburg laughed bitterly. 'Hell, Schulze? Why hell is too good a place for the men of Wotan!'

Half an hour later, the Amis had retreated over the height back into Belgium; the only sign that they had ever dared to approach German soil were the still burning Shermans on the hillside and the muddy field littered with their khaki-clad dead. Swiftly von Dodenburg re-organised the shattered stubble hoppers into the semblance of a defence force. Arming them with whatever weapons they could pick up from the Amis and allowing them to loot the dead for Hershey bars, Camel cigarettes and all the other luxuries with which the Amis always seemed equipped, he ordered them back to their original positions on the height. But he knew they would break again under the next US attack unless they were more frightened of him than of the enemy. An example had to be made.

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'An example that will frighten them shitless, Schulze,' he explained to the Wotan's senior NCO, 'so that they'd rather allow the Amis to shoot their eggs off than face me for running away.'

He ordered that the stubble hoppers' CO be brought to him, a senior lieutenant with one arm and his dirty mud-stained tunic covered with the 'tin' of five years of war.

'You've been around, I see,' the SS officer said. 'Narvik Medal, the Frozen Flesh Order from the Russian winter campaign, Wound Medal in Silver, Bronze Combat Badge, Sevastopol Medal. Hmm. But why didn't you try to stop your men running away?'

Rausch stared blankly at the handsome, black-clad SS colonel, who looked as if he had just stepped out of one of those Armed SS recruiting posters which one saw everywhere in the battered Third Reich these days.

Patiently, von Dodenburg repeated his question. Still the infantry officer did not answer. His mind was full of Meier's headless body and the bespectacled head staring up at him from the bloody rainwater at the bottom of the ditch. Von Dodenburg drew back his hand and slapped the infantry man squarely across the face. It wasn't a hard blow, but it had the desired effect. The stubble hopper shook his head, as if he were just coming out of a trance.

'What did you say?' he asked thickly through vomit-caked dry lips.

'I asked you why you didn't try to stop your men from running away?'

Raunsch shrugged.

Von Dodenburg hit him again. This time harder. A thin trickle of blood flowed from his right nostril and his eyes were suddenly liquid with pain. 'I can see that this is the only method of talking with you, Lieutenant. I asked you a question – please be good enough to answer it. Why?'

'Why? Everyone knows why, Colonel. Just look around you.' He waved a dirty hand at the survivors of his battalion. 'Old men from the stomach battalions and young kids from the Hitler Youth who are still wet behind the spoons. You can't fight with such material.' He pressed his worn face close to von Dodenburg 'Believe me, you can't fight a war with that kind of man. The army's finished and the war's over for Germany –' He broke off abruptly, as von Dodenburg swung round, leaving him standing there.

'Schwarz,' he bellowed. 'Major Schwarz, to me at once.'

His adjutant, a one-armed dark-haired major with burning, crazy eyes pushed his way through the crowd of gaping SS troopers watching their CO 'making a sow' of this pig of a stubble hopper.

'Sir,' he snapped, coming to attention as if he were back on the parade ground of the SS Officer Academy at Bad Toelz. 'At your command.'

'Get a detail with a rope, Schwarz, and take care of this matter. The officer in question has been found guilty of cowardice under fire, defeatism and lack of moral fibre. The sentence is death by hanging. You will execute it immediately.'

'Sir!'

There was a gasp of horror from the stubble hoppers. But there was no expression on Rausch's face. He accepted his fate, as if he had been expecting it all along.

Five minutes later, Rausch was hanging from the nearest tree, his tongue protruding from his purple lips, his eyes bulging from their sockets, his worn grey breeches wet where he had evacuated his bladder with the intense pain. A rough-and-ready placard hung from his neck, reading: 'I was a defeatist and coward. I have suffered a just fate. Let this be a warning to all defeatists and cowards.' Now he swung back and forth gently in the morning wind, while the stubble hoppers stared up at their former CO in wide-eyed horror. Von Dodenburg took a last look at them. He was satisfied that they would hold now, whatever the Amis cared to throw at them. But still one couldn't be too sure.

'Just to make certain that your patriotic fervour will not diminish during my absence elsewhere,' he said, 'Officer-Cadet Krause here will have orders to shoot any culprit out of hand.' He pointed to the skinny cadet, whose black tunic was already adorned with the Iron Cross and the Wound Medal in Silver, despite his seventeen years.

Krause grinned cheekily and toyed with his Walther pistol significantly.

'But,' von Dodenburg added, 'I'm quite sure now that you have all seen the errors of your previous conduct and will never again allow the Amis to set foot on the sacred soil of the Reich.' He swung round to his hard-faced, waiting veterans. 'Mount up!' he yelled at the top of his voice.

With the skill acquired in months and years of practice, the black-clad men of Wotan clambered easily on to their vehicles and swung into their positions.

'Start up!' von Dodenburg waved his arm in a great circle.

Schulze passed him his goggles. Hurriedly he pulled them down over his eyes, as all along the edge of the shattered wood, the great 360 horsepower engines burst into crazy life, sending metre-long streams of purple flame from their twin exhausts. The air was suddenly full of the acrid stench of diesel.

'Move off!' von Dodenburg yelled and grabbed the turret ring as his own Royal Tiger started to rattle forward.

Behind him the rest of the sixty-ton monsters began to follow suit. The stubble hoppers scattered out of the way as the broad steel tracks showered them with mud and pebbles. But Colonel von Dodenburg had no further eyes for them. His hard, embittered gaze was fixed on the round gleaming tower of the church in the far distance. Aachen's cathedral, in which the bones of the great Charlemagne, the father of Germany's glory, were housed: the bones of the Frankish warrior who had made the border city, which now stood squarely in the path of the Ami armies, a holy place for all Germans. Suddenly that old fervent belief in the righteousness of Germany's cause swept over von Dodenburg. He thought it had been destroyed in him completely by his knowledge of the corruption and defeatism of some of the powerful men who ran the Third Reich in this fifth year of war. But now he felt as he had in those heady victorious days of 1940, as a young lieutenant, when it had seemed that nothing could stop a reborn, revitalised Germany from conquering Europe and, with its bright new National Socialist creed,

give a new lease of life to a tired old continent.

As his eager young veterans of Battle Group Wotan in their great tanks swung into line behind him and began to rattle towards the city to which the Führer himself had ordered them, Colonel Kuno von Dodenburg promised himself grimly that no enemy soldier would ever set foot in Holy Aachen.

CHAPTER 3

'Heil Hitler!'

The tall, emaciated man standing at the shattered window of the Aachen Battle HQ, dressed in the black uniform of an SS Police General, did not react to the new 'Hitler Greeting', which everyone in the Wehrmacht had been forced to use instead of the traditional salute since the abortive July Putsch, the attempt on Hitler's life.

Colonel von Dodenburg looked inquiringly at Schwarz to his right and then at Schulze to his left. Schulze tapped his right temple in silence, as if the Police General's silence was yet another symptom of Donner's well-known craziness.

'So you too think I haven't got all my cups in the cupboard, Sergeant-Major?' General Donner asked tonelessly, still not turning round to face the three Wotan men. He laughed, humourlessly. 'Do not feel embarrassed. You are in a goodly company, including that of the greatest captain of all times. Who else but a crazy man would take over the command of the defence of a place like Aachen! It's a one-way ticket to heaven, isn't it – or, perhaps better, hell?'

Then von Dodenburg realised how the General had seen Schulze's disrespectful gesture. A small mirror was attached to the window in front of him.

'Ah, my dear Colonel, you've spotted it – my little trick eh? Very necessary in the Third Reich in this year of 1944, believe you me. It is a wise person who knows what is going on behind his back and takes precautions accordingly. Like this!' Donner's foot shot out. He pressed a brass button let into the floor. The next instant a great opaque sheet of what looked like glass crashed down from the ceiling and formed a barrier between the three soldiers and the man at the window. 'Bullet-proof glass, gentlemen,' Donner said, amused at the shock on their faces. 'A little trick of mine, which usually impresses my visitors. And it does take the edge off the initial impact of this handsome mug of mine.'

In that same instant he turned and von Dodenburg gasped with horror. The General was a mutilated monster. Half his face had been shot away, a glass eye fixed for ever in a stiff unwinking stare in the livid pink hole. His

mouth was a thin mauve line without lips in which the great false teeth were visible right to their bright red plastic gums. With a shell-shattered arm from which the hand hung like a withered black talon, Donner gestured towards his ruined face. 'The Ukraine in forty-two, gentlemen. Partisan attack. Forty thousand Ivans had gone up in the ovens that year. The cost? Very low. I was made into a monster whose own wife has screaming fits when her husband feels one of those nasty male urges and is forced to remind her of her marital obligations.'

Colonel von Dodenburg pulled himself together with difficulty. 'Colonel von Dodenburg reporting obediently for duty,' he snapped, using the traditional address. 'Battle Group Wotan under command. Fifteen hundred effectives. Thirty Tigers presently in position. The panzer grenadier element following on foot from Dueren. Sir!'

General Donner waved him to stand at ease and sized the handsome young SS officer up for a few moments before speaking. 'I have heard a great deal of the Wotan. Even we rear-echelon stallions sometimes take a little interest in the activities of you front swine. The capture of Eben Emael in forty – now I'm afraid in Ami hands, if my Intelligence is not mistaken. The surprise crossing of the River Bug in forty-one at the beginning of Barbarossa.' Russia and then Cassino this year. An impressive record. No wonder they call the Wotan the Führer's Fire Brigade, sent wherever there is a blaze.'

'We are no different from the rest of the formation, sir,' von Dodenburg said while Schwarz nodded his agreement. 'We share the same spirit. It is just that my men are more experienced than those in other SS units.'

Donner swung round on him stiffly and von Dodenburg could see that his ruined body was supported by some kind of metal corset underneath the immaculate black uniform. 'My dear Colonel, I hear a lot of rubbish talked about the spirit of the SS. I shit on the spirit of the SS!'

Schwarz, the fanatical Nazi, who had been turned nearly crazy by the discovery that he was half Jew, looked shocked. But the Police General went on.

'They are as good or as bad, as corrupt or as loyal, as the rest of our nation is in this fifth year of war.'

'Corrupt, sir?' von Dodenburg queried, avoiding Donner's glassy stare.

'Don't try to fool me, Colonel! I may be a little crazy, but I'm not that crazy. You know and I know that our system is rotten. Since July everybody

can't help but notice it. Even in the ranks of black elite there arc those who are paid to betray their corps, their folk comrades, their very nation to save their precious skins or positions.' The bitter tone went out of his metallic voice which, like his face and body, seemed yet another artificial product of the military surgeons in Berlin. 'That is why I asked the Reich Main Security Office for your formation, von Dodenburg. My dear Colonel I have not been a police officer for most of my life for nothing, you know.' He tapped the withered black claw on the sheaf of papers lying on his desk and at the same moment pressed the button which sent his safety device shooting back into the ceiling. 'I have all I need to know about you and your men in these documents.'

'And that is, sir?'

'That your men are trained killers, men who have no loyalty to anyone but their comrades and their regiment – the Wotan.' He looked at von Dodenburg keenly. 'There is only one gap in my information. To whom do you owe your loyalty?'

Schulze caught his breath and tightened his grip on the Schmeisser machine-pistol which hung from his neck. Ever since the July Plot he had appointed himself the CO's unofficial bodyguard, a necessary precaution in a Germany lousy with informers and Gestapo spies. They could make a simple wet fart into a statement of disloyalty to the Führer, and that could mean being garrotted to death by chicken wire in some stinking Gestapo cellar. Would his handsome young CO put his foot in it with this monstrous-looking policeman?

'To whom do I owe my loyalty?' von Dodenburg echoed. 'Why, I owe it to the men of Wotan in the first place and then to Germany.'

Donner's thin mauve line of a mouth puckered into the semblance of a smile. 'Good, von Dodenburg. This is exactly what I wanted to hear from you. Excellent. It is for that reason that I have volunteered for this command. This goddam Catholic Aachen is Charlemagne's city – the heartland of Germany, not National Socialist Germany, but all Germany. If it falls to the Amis, the rest will not be long in following. For two reasons – the door to the Reich will be opened for good and the psychological effect will kill the ordinary man's will to resist the Allied advance. Aachen must remain German.' He pointed the withered claw at von Dodenburg and the young officer felt the blond hairs rise at the nape of his neck. 'And you and your Wotan will help me to ensure that it does. Now let us get down to business.'

As they grouped themselves around the big wall map and tried to forget the roar and thunder of the Ami barrage which was already pounding the town's suburbs, the Police General briefed them on the situation.

'Aachen stands directly in the path of the US First Army. At present its commander, the Ami Hodges, is grouping his three corps on the Reich's frontier with Belgium and Holland, here and here.' He placed the blackened claw on the map. 'But it is more likely that he will try to break into the Aachen Gap with this corps here – the Seventh – commanded by an Ami named Collins. Lightning Joe, I believe they call him. With the kind of enemy the good General Collins will find opposing him in and around Aachen, it will not be too difficult to justify such a nickname.'

He drew breath and they could hear the air wheeze through his ravaged lungs. 'In essence, I have one good division to defend Aachen – von Schwerin's 116th Panzer out in the forest area to the east. You may ask what an armoured division is doing out in the woods. The answer is simple. Von Schwerin has exactly ten tanks left from the debacle in France, but his men are well trained and skilled. That is more than can be said for my force in the west. There I've got three stomach battalions, one ear-and-nose and four fortress battalions.' Cannon-fodder, in other words. But they'll hold out well enough as long as they've got a metre of ferro-concrete bunker in front of them, and,' he smiled, 'a company of chain-dogs behind them ready to string them up at the nearest tree in case they lose their patriotic fervour'.

He took his eyes off the map and turned to the three SS men. 'Now, von Dodenburg, I want to keep your Battle Group as a mobile reserve, at least till your panzer grenadiers arrive. You will bolster up any section of the Aachen front which comes under undue pressure. Once the Amis launch their full-scale attack, the front will begin to spring leaks everywhere, believe me. But we will have to worry about that eventuality when it occurs. For the time being, I want you to take up positions in the city and carry out certain special tasks I have in mind for you.'

'And they are, sir?'

Donner did not answer for a moment. Instead he reached up with his forefinger and thumb and squeezed out the glass eye. Behind it was a deep cavity filled with red mucus. Von Dodenburg barely repressed a sound of disgust as Donner began to wipe the glass eye with an immaculate silk handkerchief.

'Blood and scum,' the Police General explained easily, 'It collects there.

I have to clean it regularly. There are other, more unpleasant chores that I have to carry out in the privacy of my own quarters. Apparently the result of a surgeon's knife is not as efficient in ridding itself of its waste products as nature is.'

Casually he replaced the glass eye. Von Dodenburg thought he could now understand the reason for the unpleasant odour of the crippled Police General.

'Now where was I, von Dodenburg?'

'Certain special tasks?' he prompted thickly, imagining what Donner's body must look like under the immaculate black uniform, and feeling the vomit rise in his throat.

'Yes. I want you to tidy up the city.'

'Tidy up, sir?'

'Yes, there is a bloody awful situation here at the moment. As you probably know Aachen is nearly one hundred per cent black and now those damn warm brothers of popes are encouraging their flock to stay behind in the city.'

'But I thought the Führer himself had ordered the evacuation of the civilian population, sir?'

'Yes, he did. So who do you think evacuated the city first, leaving the population and those mealy-mouthed priests to do exactly as they liked? No other than our brave folk-comrades of the SA, who were supposed to be in charge of the evacuation, including their courageous leader County Leader Schmeer, who is now safely lodged fifty kilometres away in Cologne. But by God, not for long!'

Schulze guffawed suddenly. 'Typical golden pheasants,' he snorted, using the soldiers' contemptuous name for the gold-braided SA leaders, 'it's the migratory season for them – they always fly away at the slightest sign of danger, General.'

Donner nodded stiffly, as if his scarred neck were worked by steel springs. 'Quite right, Sergeant-Major, but it is not too advisable to go about risking a big lip like you do. Someone might sew it up for you one day for good.'

Schulze's big grin vanished. Donner was not a man to be fooled around with.

'As a result the remaining population of Aachen – some twenty thousand – has buried itself in the ruins and cellars of the old city to wait for

the Amis – those teatime soldiers – to come. Then those damned black crows will pause from fingering their genitals to use their flock as a means of putting pressure on me to declare Catholic Aachen an open city. Well, von Dodenburg, they are not going to pull that kind of trick on General Degenhardt Donner! So your first task will be to clear the old city of the civilian population. They are only useless mouths to feed.'

'And if they won't go, sir?'

Donner's mouth twisted in a horrible parody of a smile. 'Won't? The word does not exist in my vocabulary, my dear Colonel. The answer to your problem is simple.' He pulled an imaginary trigger with his forefinger. 'This is, after all, total war, if we are to believe our own little poison dwarf Goebbels. We shot the useless mouths in the Ukraine. What is to stop us doing the same thing in Holy Aachen?'

'Nothing, sir' von Dodenburg answered weakly.

'Fine. Then that is all for the present. Get to it, Colonel von Dodenburg.'

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The debris-littered, shattered street, still smoking from the morning's artillery bombardment, was deserted save for two old women in rusty black looting an abandoned coal stock.

Schulze pushed his cap to the back of his big head and breathed, 'By the great whore of Buxtehude – if you'll forgive my German, gentlemen, that man in there looks like the devil himself!'

Colonel von Dodenburg nodded thoughtfully. His eyes were fixed on the wall signs which had appeared everywhere these last few weeks, 'Hush, the enemy is listening,' accompanied by the sketch of a listening Ami spy, but he was remembering Donner's horribly mutilated face.

'You might be right, Schulze,' he said at last. 'A devil – but a devil whom I think I can follow.' His voice rose with growing confidence. 'For if General Donner is a devil, I wish Germany today were full of such fighting devils.' He shouldered his Schmeisser machine pistol more comfortably. 'Come on, gentlemen, let's see if we can't sort out those shitty civilians now.'

CHAPTER 4

Aachen was dying. The two hundred Flying Fortresses, which had carried out the afternoon raid with such cold, majestic detachment, were flying back to their bases in England, as von Dodenburg's 'hunting commandos' started to penetrate the shattered old city to root out the civilians. As the smoke started to drift away, Aachen appeared before them in stark, macabre horror. Whole blocks had been replaced by wastelands of rubble, pockmarked by hundreds of craters and laced by the grotesquely twisted, reddened girders of ruined buildings. But it was not the gutted, windowless, roofless buildings nor the mountains of rubble that caught the 'hunting commandos' eyes as they paced the cobbled, littered streets, handkerchiefs tied round their mouths against the soot and ash still raining down from the houses set afire somewhere in the suburbs; it was the dead. They were everywhere.

'Holy straw sack,' Schulze exclaimed, as he led his own group through the piles of human debris,' the place looks like a sodding butcher's shop

'Serves the pigs right,' his second-in-command, one-legged Sergeant Matz grunted, 'the bastards should have got out when they were ordered to!' With his good foot he took a hefty swing at a head still encased in a white-painted civilian helmet. It bounced away like a football and rolled into a bomb-crater.

A short thundering roar like that of a great wave breaking drowned his next words. It was followed by a long-drawn-out hiss, as a wall directly in front of them crumbled and came crashing to the ground in a cloud of thick grey choking dust. Bricks bounced across the road towards them and the 'hunting commandos' ducked instinctively. It was fortunate that they did so. For at that same moment, a vicious high-pitched burst of machine-pistol fire cut the air just above their heads.

Schulze reacted immediately. He lobbed a potato masher blindly into the general direction from which the sudden fire had come and sent his men running to left and right, firing from the hip.

'Amis,' he yelled, 'Amis have penetrated the old city!'

But Sergeant-Major Schulze was wrong; their assailant turned out to be a German. A small heavy-jowled man, with bulging eyes like glass marbles and long dangling hands which reached down below his knees, dressed in the

brown uniform of a SA major, his fat chest heavy with the 'tin' of the old war.

Matz punched him in the face and threw him in front of a surprised Schulze. 'A jam-shitting golden pheasant,' he exclaimed. 'He was hiding out over there behind. that jam-shitting chimney-stack ready to take another pot-shot at us.' Matz hit him again with his clenched fist. The man's fat lips burst. His false teeth bulged out of his mouth and blood began to trickle from one corner.

'All right, Matz, leave him alone,' Schulze commanded. 'Give him a chance to speak. Now then, you shifty golden pheasant, what are you doing here and why did you fire on us?'

'I mistook you for civilians,' the heavy-jowled SA man stammered. 'A nervous reaction.' He wiped the blood from his mouth. 'Why should I fire on our own brave boys? You see those civilians would like to take it from me?'

'Take what?' Schulze snapped.

The SA man was suddenly hesitant. Schulze nodded to Matz. The one-legged NCO brought his hand down smartly in a brutal chop against the SA man's nose. Something snapped like a twig. The SA man staggered back, tears streaming from his eyes and mingling with the thick red blood which poured from his shattered nose.

'Now, you piece of ape-turd, let's have it or you'll be looking at the potatoes from below in five minutes flat,' Schulze threatened.

In spite of his pain, the SA man hurried to explain. 'I didn't go with the rest when Schmeer ordered the evacuation. I had too many interests in Aachen... and I couldn't leave my girls behind. There wasn't enough room for them in the convoy –'

'What did you say?' Schulze broke in. 'Girls.' He threw a significant look at the suddenly attentive patrol. 'Girls with tits and legs right up to their uses?'

The fat SA man nodded.

'Well, where, man – where?' Schulze exploded.

The golden pheasant pointed a blood-stained finger at the heap of rubble of the newly collapsed wall, his face miserable. 'Below that – it used to be the old SA headquarters... I fixed it up myself for me and the girls so that we –'

'Come on, lads, let's not waste time,' Schulze interrupted excitedly, his eyes gleaming with anticipation. 'I'm already beginning to limp at the thought of those dames! Let's go and have a look at this pheasant's passion parlour.'

But Battle Group Wotan's attempts to evacuate Aachen's remaining civilian population was not having the same pleasureable results everywhere. Von Dodenburg was driving Donner carefully through the littered smoking streets in the VW jeep when he heard the sound which told him that something had gone wrong with the evacuation plan. At first it was not much more than a subdued murmur, a distant monotone without pitch or form.

'What's that?' Donner snapped.

'I don't know. General, but we'll soon find out.'

With difficulty he turned the VW round in the narrow, rubble-littered street and headed slowly towards the sound, now beginning to form itself into three words, chanted over and over again by hundreds of hoarse throats:

'STOP THE EVACUATION!'

The VW jeep swung round the corner and came to a sudden halt. Drawn up in front of them, Schwarz and Officer-Cadet Krause plus two 'hunting commandos' were facing a mob of screaming women: fat housewives in dark ugly clothes; plain immature girls, undernourished and pale-faced, their budding unfettered breasts pushing gently through the thin washed-out material of their dresses; nuns in great sweeping white headdresses – 'white swans', von Dodenburg remembered having called them in his youth; grandmothers in rusty black coats; female auxiliaries – 'field mattresses', the troops nicknamed them – in sloppy grey uniforms, all of them screaming hysterically at the top of their voices.

Von Dodenburg sprang from the Jeep and ran across to Major Schwarz. 'What's going on, Schwarz?'

Schwarz swung round and shouted above the row, 'They won't let us move any farther. I tried to clear the street, but they wouldn't allow me to get far.' He turned his face to emphasise his point. His right cheek was clawed and bleeding from cheek to jaw. 'One of the bitches did this to me!'

Suddenly the hysterical chant stopped. The women had spotted Donner. Someone gasped with horror at his face. Another cried, 'There he is, Monseigneur – that devil Donner! He's here himself

The front rank of the sweating, flushed women parted and a fat unshaven priest wearing the soutane and shovel hat of a Monseigneur stepped into the space between the apprehensive young SS men and the women who had called him. He fumbled with his gold-rimmed pince-nez and cleared his throat.

Donner beat him to it. 'What do you want, you damned crow?'

'Don't you talk to the Monseigneur like that, you God-forsaken devil!' a woman in widow's black in the front rank cried angrily. The fat priest raised his plump soft hand to silence her. He looked up at the tall SS General. 'Excuse my children, General,' he said humbly. 'But all they want is to be left in peace. Left in their homes or what is left of them.'

Donner did not deign to look at the priest. His glassy gaze was fixed on some far horizon high above his head. 'Firstly they are not your children. They are German folk comrades, albeit female, who must obey the laws of the Reich like any other good National Socialist. Secondly they are useless mouths, which must be removed from the city, at once.'

'But sir,' the priest pleaded and raised his sweating hands in supplication, moving forward as if he were about to throw himself at the SS General's gleaming jackboots and plead for mercy.

Donner pushed him away with the tip of his riding crop. 'Keep your damn distance, Pope!'

'But I must insist, General. You can't do this terrible thing to my people –'

'Schwarz,' Donner cried, ignoring him, 'arrest this damned crow, will you! He's beginning to bore me.'

'Sir!'

The Jewish SS Major, whose hatred of the clergy was as fanatical as his hatred of his own race, stepped forward. His face empty of emotion, he raised his black-gloved artificial hand and swung it against the priest's face. The priest staggered back, his glasses falling to the ground. Schwarz ground his iron-shod heel on them and snapped, 'Officer-Cadet Krause, arrest this man at once.'

A roar of anger went up from the women. They surged forward. Donner backed away. 'Stop them, von Dodenburg,' he cried, alarmed by the naked hate in the women's faces. 'Order your men to fire!'

'But General, they are women and they are German,' he protested. Then it was too late.

Their eyes shining crazily, cursing and spitting, they fell on the handful of troops. The street became a confused mess of twisting, snarling men and women, clawing and grabbing at each other. Krause dodged the low kick launched at his crotch by a field mattress and grabbed at her grey blouse. It ripped. The screaming snarling woman's bare breasts, released from the official-issue bra, fell out.

Krause's jaw dropped in awe, just as another woman sprang on his back and clutching her skinny arm round his neck began to strangle him, shouting at the top of her voice.

An elderly woman tried to hit Schwarz with her umbrella. He ducked and a blow landed on his helmet with a hollow boom. The next instant he had punched her in her belly with his wooden hand. She gasped and went down like a deflated balloon.

A pretty girl with long bright red hair ripped her nails across von Dodenburg's face. He winced with pain. 'You sow!' he grunted and attempted to grab her hand, the blood dripping down her fingers. He missed. She swung at him again. He ducked and flung his arms round her. Suddenly he felt her body, warm and nubile, pressed close to him and sensed the heady scent of her flaming hair just under his nose.

'Let go, you SS swine,' she screamed, wriggling desperately to break his hold, her green eyes looking up at him, burning with rage, her soft stomach pressed provocatively into his loins as she tried to do so.

He felt his excitement grow. Suddenly she realised that the handsome blond colonel in the black uniform was aroused. Her struggling ceased. She tried to withdraw her body from the importuning loins. But he wouldn't let her.

'Come on, you bitch, don't let go now,' he said hoarsely.

'You swine – you absolute swine,' she whispered, looking up at him, the anger suddenly gone out of the green eyes, 'Have you no shame?'

But his answer was drowned by the shot from Donner's pistol and the scream of the woman in the black widow's weeds, who slowly began to sink to the ground, her black-stockinged legs buckling under her.

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'Heaven, arse and twine,' Schulze breathed as he looked around the great underground room, piled high with supplies, with the drunken whores sprawled out on the cushions listening to the ancient horn gramophone, 'it's like ladies' night in a Turkish bath.' He gulped and, pushing back his helmet, took in the seven or eight whores, dressed in gaudy underwear, champagne glasses in hand, listening to Johannes Heesters singing '*Gem hab' ich die Frauen geküsst*!'

'Oh, my holy Christ,' Matz standing next to him said. 'Have you ever

seen so much meat and so few potatoes in all your life, Sergeant-Major?'

Suddenly the girls became aware of their presence. A big blonde whore in transparent black underwear tripped drunkenly towards Schulze, arms outstretched.

'Men,' she breathed, her eyes half closed, 'real men – with tails.'

Gently Schulze avoided her grasp. 'Later, darling, later.' He turned to the fat squat SA man. 'You mean you've been living with this lot?' he asked incredulously. 'No wonder you've got such round shoulders.'

'It wasn't easy,' the SA man answered, trying to stem the flow of blood from his broken nose. 'I had to take a lot of rest.'

'The pig,' the blonde whore sniffed. 'At it all day like a fiddler's elbow. Nothing in his head, but plenty between the legs, that one.'

'I should have such troubles,' Matz breathed, putting his arm around a dark-haired whore in a frilly negligée and sheer black silk stockings. 'I'd have died a happy man.'

'Hold yer water,' Schulze snapped. 'Can't you see that I'm shitting well thinking?'

'Oh, I thought you were suffering from wind, Sergeant-Major,' Matz answered, giving the dark-haired whore's mighty right breast a powerful squeeze.

Schulze ignored him. 'All right, you golden pheasant,' he answered, 'I'm not going to turn you and your little bees in. You can stay here.'

The SA man's face lit up despite his pain, while the excited half-naked girls crowded around the soldiers, giggling and laughing. 'Thank you, sir, thank you from the bottom of my heart.'

'Shut up,' Schulze said brutally. 'There are conditions. You've got to keep your hairy paws off them. From now onwards, your little bees belong to us and to us exclusively. Get it?'

'Of course, of course,' he agreed.

'You've got plenty of chow and booze here. And when you run out, we'll supply you with more. All we want is that when we're off duty, your bees' pearly gates are open, ready and waiting.'

'Don't worry, soldier,' the big blonde said, lighting a thin black cigar, 'we're all ready for a little bit of fresh meat, aren't we girls?'

'Yes,' they chorused enthusiastically. 'We have had enough of that pig. If you only knew what the fat bastard made us do these last few days.'

Matz laughed throatily and began fumbling with his flies. 'You ain't

seen nothing yet, ladies.'

Schulze gave him a rough push. 'Knock that off! There's no time for that now. You'll have to wait till tonight when the colonel stands us down.'

'Not even a quickie, Sergeant-Major? I won't even bother to take my wooden leg off.'

'I'll take off yer stupid head, if you don't shut up,' Schulze threatened. 'We're supposed to be on patrol. You can't go screwing around when you're on duty. All right, all of you outside – on the shitting double. And you, my little fat golden pheasant,' he brought his big face close to that of the SA man's threateningly, 'I'm making you responsible for seeing that your bees are ready for us tonight!' Gallantly Schulze raised his helmet. 'Then, ladies, I must bid you adieu till later.' He beamed at them. 'I trust you will have a pleasant day, and can stand the long wait till your prince returns.'

The whores giggled uproariously. At the door to the cellar he turned and gave them one long hand-kiss as did Johannes Heesters in the movies.

'Till tonight, my fair ones.'

But Sergeant-Major Schulze and his 'hunting commando' were doomed to disappointment. They had hardly recommenced their patrol when Colonel von Dodenburg's VW jeep came bouncing up the pitted road, its horn sounding an urgent signal. The colonel pulled up with a squeal of brakes.

Schulze looked at the CO in surprise. He was helmetless, his face flushed and scratched, and a red-haired beauty was slumped sulkily in the back seat, her pale oval face stained with drying tears. But von Dodenburg did not give him time to dwell on the situation.

'Matz, you take over the platoon and get back to HQ at the double. You, Schulze, get in the front next to me. I need you urgently.'

'What's up, sir?'

Colonel von Dodenburg rammed home first gear while Matz rapped out his orders to the platoon. 'Everything's up. We've just put down a shiny riot – women and a priest. And now the balloon's really gone up.'

As the Jeep shot forward, throwing Schulze violently against the hard seat and nearly tossing the redhead from her perch, von Dodenburg snapped through gritted teeth, 'The damn Amis have broken through in force in the Aachen State Forest. We're in trouble, Schulze, real trouble.'

CHAPTER 5

The little red lamp inside the lumbering Royal Tiger blinked on and off evilly. It signified that the tank's 88 mm and twin MGs were ready for action. Schulze, squatting in the gunner's seat next to von Dodenburg, did not need the warning light, however, to tell him that they were heading for trouble. He felt it in his bones.

Now they had left the ruined suburbs and were advancing in an attack V across rough undulating country. The landscape ahead had that tense, empty look that always signified a coming battlefield. It was as though the very earth itself were dreading the slaughter to come.

'Driver straight along the embankment,' von Dodenburg intoned. 'Schulze – six hundred. Traverse left.' With the easy efficiency of years of practice, Schulze swung the fourteen-ton turret round and set the range at the same time. They were getting close to the thick pine wood in which the Amis had dug in. Soon the trouble would start and he might get his stupid turnip blown off without even having had a chance to sample the delights of his private brothel.

'Shining war,' he grumbled to himself and pressed his eye to the rubber-shod eye-piece. 'Can't even get a piece of tail in peace?'

'Did you say something, Schulze?' von Dodenburg queried, busy with his twin periscopes.

'Yessir,' Schulze snapped. 'I said – I'm going to rip 'em to pieces today. I feel just in the right mood.'

'Hmm,' his CO answered. 'I'll believe you, but thousands wouldn't.'

The tanks rumbled on across the open fields. The woods came closer and closer. Five hundred metres, four hundred. Three hundred and fifty.

'Stand by, Schulze,' von Dodenburg ordered. 'Driver reduce speed now.'

With a deafening roar the driver crashed through half a dozen of the sixty-ton monster's thirty-odd gears to bring down the Tiger's speed. At the same time, Schulze pressed his shoulder against the 88's leather-bound grip so that he could move the great hooded gun with the slightest movement. His hand gripped the trigger handle tightly. Now the crosshairs inside the glass circle of the sight were aligned perfectly with the wood. A few seconds more and the CO would give the order to fire; he would send the first High

Explosive shell screaming into the wood. The rest of the Wotan would follow suit and then they would sit back to wait for the panic-stricken Ami stubble hoppers to come running out to be massacred by the waiting machine-gunners. It was a simple plan – a risky one if faced by well dug-in, trained infantry armed with bazookas. But von Dodenburg, like most SS officers, was contemptuous of the Ami's fighting ability. He was prepared to take chances he would never have taken with the Tommies and Ivans.

Von Dodenburg's attack did not develop as he had anticipated. Suddenly an open truck, filled with troops, came flashing from behind the wood, travelling across the field at high speed, its occupants bouncing up and down like toy soldiers.

'Amis!' the driver gasped. 'Amis at twelve o'clock, sir.'

'I'm not blind,' von Dodenburg commented coldly.

Even before he could rap out the order, Schulze had swung the 88 round.

'FIRE!'

There was stomach-jerking spasm of the recoil. The turret flooded with acrid yellow smoke. The gleaming shell-case clattered smoking to the metal deck, as the shell itself screamed towards its target. It struck the Ami deuce-and-half just above the engine. With a roar it exploded, ripping apart metal, canvas, human flesh.

As the force of the shock wave struck him in the face, von Dodenburg grabbed the turret MG. The force of the explosion had thrown some of the Amis from the shattered, now burning truck. Frantically the survivors were trying to pelt for the wood. Von Dodenburg pressed the trigger. 7-mm slugs tore through the the air at 800 rounds a minute. A man caught in mid-stride seemed suspended there like a statue of a runner. Then he flopped down, his body hiccuping convulsively. Another fell, throwing up his arms with wild pain so that his grease-gun rose high into the air. Others were felled, as if their legs had been sawn off at the knees.

Von Dodenburg lowered the gun. With a last burst he swept the grass so that even those feigning death would not escape. In thirty seconds it was all over and they were rattling past the smashed truck leaning on its side on burst tyres, the flames licking up about its cargo of dead Amis. Their great tracks churned over the bodies and were turned red with their blood.

'Ami tanks!' the driver yelled frantically.

As the first Sherman burst out of the bushes, trying desperately to

protect the threatened infantry of the First US Infantry Division, the famous 'Big Red One', Schulze pulled the firing lever. The Royal Tiger shuddered. They hit the Sherman just below the turret at point-blank range. The tank was flung high into the air. It descended with a bomb-like whine and buried its gun deep into the soft earth.

'Two o'clock – Ami!' von Dodenburg screamed, automatically pressing the fume-extractor to clear the acrid yellow smoke now blinding them.

A Sherman armed with the new British seventeen-pounder gun was trying to approach them from the flank, knowing that the Tiger's half-metre-thick frontal glacis plate was virtually impregnable. But from the side the seventeen-pounder might be able to penetrate the base of the turret-ring or knock off a boogie wheel and cripple the massive German tank.

Using all his strength, Schulze flung the gun round. The Sherman slid into the glass circle of his lenses. The cross-wires sliced it in half. He snatched at the lever. The gun erupted.. For a fleeting instant his vision was obscured by the yellow-red burst of the shell. Then the Sherman rocked from side to side, as if in a high wind. Oily black smoke and red sparks welled from its open turret. The tank commander was fighting his way out of the hatch but the flames were already licking at his body. He slumped over the turret. The flames leapt up, eating his uniform. They caught his hair, sprang to the face and the slow-moving, ever-weakening hands that tried in vain to beat them out. Before Schulze's eyes, the tank commander's face began to turn into a charred grinning death's head.

But there was no time for such horrors. An American M-40 Self-Propelled gun was lumbering out of the forest, followed by another – and another. And the Ami SPs were armed with 105 mm guns – a match even for the 88. This time the Amis scored first. A 105 mm roared with a tremendous fury. One of the Tigers on the right flank shuddered to a halt, a broken track flapping in front of it like a severed limb. The Ami SPs saw their advantage. In an instant they had turned their massive guns on the stricken German tank. Red and white balls of flame, AP shells, hurtled through the grey sky towards the Tiger. Time and again it heeled back and forth struck by each new shell. Its crew began to panic.

'Stay there! For Christ sake, stay there!' von Dodenburg yelled desperately over the radio.

But even the veterans of Wotan could not stand up to such cruel, concentrated fire. They bailed out from the turret and escape hatches and

began to pelt madly for cover. From the cover of the woods came a vicious burst of US BAR-fire. One after another, the black-clad tankers flung up their arms in wild abandon and fell to the ground as the hot lead buried into their defenceless flesh.

'Lights!' von Dodenburg commanded urgently. 'Driver, flick off your lights quickly – and on again!'

The expected reaction came. The M-40s swung round their long cannon and started to concentrate their fire on the command tank. For some reason which von Dodenburg had still not been able to work out, the sight of the lights always angered or attracted enemy tank fire. A shell scored its way along the outside of the tank turret. Fascinated, he watched as the impact traced a white-hot line around the inside of the turret. It would only take one fragment to penetrate the armour somewhere or other and they would all be dead or maimed within seconds; for the fragment would fly from side to side until it found a victim inside the tight confines of the turret.

'Concentrate at nine!' he cried through the mike as his own gun erupted again. Swiftly he flung a look through the periscope at his nearest neighbour, Matz's tank.

Matz was way out. 'Nine, I said, you whore son,' he yelled. Not eleven! Turn seven minus thirty-six. Fire!'

A moment later Matz's gun joined in. Together he and Matz tried to pin the Amis down, backing them against the wood with their concentrated fire so that they would not be able to manoeuvre. But they hadn't reckoned with the commander of the first enemy SP. The tank was lumbering towards them at top speed. Desperately Schulze spun the turret round. The triangles met in the sighting mechanism. He fired too late. The great shell missed the Ami by a dozen metres. The SP's bulk blacked out the whole lenses. It seemed as if the Tiger were about to capsize. It rocked on its base. Screams rang out from the driver's compartment, drowned by the grinding crash of metal meeting metal at speed.

Von Dodenburg was flung against the breech of the cannon. Fortunately he still had his helmet on. But his vision was obscured by violent, moving red lights. Schulze clung grimly to the leather grip, the blood pouring from his nostrils with the impact, and waited for the rocking motion to cease. Frantically he ripped off his earphones. Thrusting back the hatch cover, he raised his head into the air.

The crew of the M-40 was sprawled out in the SP's open deck like a

bunch of drunks, paralysed momentarily by the shock of the impact. In a few moments, they would come out of it and begin to react. But Schulze did not give them time to do so. He grabbed a phosphorous grenade attached to the inside of the turret. He pulled the china-ring pin and lobbed it neatly into the centre of the sprawled-out men. It exploded at once, shooting fiery pellets of burning phosphorus everywhere, burning whitely as they descended on to their human victims. He followed it by a normal potato masher. The scorching, screaming bodies rose and fell heavily onto the deck. Hastily he dropped back into his seat and pulled shut the hatch cover. The driver rumbled forward again.

The Ami SPs did not have a chance. Fifteen Tigers and Royal Tigers concentrated their fire upon them, as they backed into the wood, trying to scuttle for cover and finding that even their weight and power could not force a path through the thick pines. The Tigers rolled forward, intent on the kill, churning earth and mud. Shell after shell ripped through the burning, trembling air. One by one the crippled M-40s, rocked from side to side by the German fire, abandoned the fight, their crews bolting for the woods and finding that the enemy gunners were waiting for them to do exactly that. A last Sherman appeared and tried to give the fleeing crews some sort of cover. The Ami tank did not get too far. A blood-lust had overcome the sweating, smoke-blackened German gunners. A direct hit knocked off the tank's turret and flung it high into the air. The gunners could see right into its guts where the lower part of the commander's body was still squatting in his seat. The gunner was crouched beside him over his gun-sight. But his gun and his hands were gone, and the blood dripped from his shattered wrists.

Moments later the last Ami resistance was over and the SS men had jumped out of their vehicles, eyes red with blood, faces black with smoke, to loot the enemy tanks for cigarettes and the highly prized Ami canned rations. But von Dodenburg knew that there were still Ami infantry in the wood and it would soon be dusk. Once it was dark, even the Amis might feel brave enough to tackle the Tigers with their excellent bazookas and Hawkins grenades.

'Schulze,' he bellowed above the crackle of the flames and the exuberant yells of the young SS troopers. 'Get those shitty wet tails out of these tanks, will you?'

'Yessir,' Schulze neatly pocketed two packets of C-rations, far superior to their own issue cans of 'Old Man', which was reputedly made of old men

salvaged from the workhouses. 'I'll get right on to it. All right,' his voice rose above the noise. 'Get those leaden tails back into your vehicles before I have the eggs off'n yer with a blunt razor blade! MOUNT UP!'

It was a massacre. Swinging out to left and right of the wood, ignoring the wobbling clumsy bombs of the Ami bazookas with their trail of fiery sparks, and the patter of machine-gun fire against their thick armoured sides, the Tigers took up their positions and ground to a halt.

Von Dodenburg stood upright in the turret. He could imagine what must be going through the terrified Amis' heads now. They were trapped, and they knew it. From a small group of foxholes at the edge of the pines, a handful of desperate stubble hoppers opened a wild fire at his tank.

Unhurried, almost casually, he spoke into his throat mike. 'Matz, clear up that mess at the edge of the wood, will you, before we start?'

The one-legged NCO, who had lost his other with Wotan at Cassino after lying out in the open for three days with gangrene, needed no urging. 'Yessir,' he barked and ordered his tank forward.

The Tiger rattled straight towards the dug-in Amis. Ignoring the terrified bursts of white tracer bouncing off its glacis like harmless golf balls, Matz ran over the first of the foxholes. Through his glasses, von Dodenburg could see the horrified GIs duck before their white blobs of faces were blocked out by the sixty-ton bulk of the Tiger. But Matz was too old a hand to allow the Amis to escape by cowering in the bottom of their little holes. Deliberately, he started to swing the Tiger back and forth, clouds of blue smoke pouring from its twin exhausts. The sides of the holes started to crumble. The Tiger sagged as one side of the pit gave way. If there were screams, von Dodenburg could not hear them, but he could imagine the crushed bloody pulp now filling the bottom of the foxhole.

Its track churned up flesh and earth as Matz rumbled on to the next foxhole and repeated the performance. Once von Dodenburg caught a glimpse of what looked a human arm swinging back and forth with the tracks, but it vanished as soon as Matz's Tiger rolled on to the next hole.

'All right, Matz,' he cried in the end, sickened in spite of himself. 'You've had your litre of blood for today. Come on back into line.'

'I'd sooner have a bit of the other any day, sir,' Matz replied, his excitement noticeable even over the crackling tank radio. But he pulled away obediently, leaving the bloody remains of the GIs squashed to pulp at the bottom of the graves into which they had unwittingly dug themselves.

Von Dodenburg did not waste any further time. The black clouds were coming in rapidly now from the east and he did not want to be caught out in the dark without the protection of his panzer grenadier infantry.

'HE five rounds,' he yelled over the mike,' commence firing!'

The twenty-nine cannon roared. The immense barrage crashed into the wood at two hundred metres range. Pines smashed like matchsticks. Within seconds the wood had ceased to exist. But von Dodenburg wanted to make sure that none of the Ami stubble hoppers survived.

'Cease fire,' he cried into the throat mike. Then. 'Two rounds of incendiary!'

Rapidly the sweating gunners ejected the great heavy round of HE and replaced it with incendiary. Time was pressing. It really was getting dark now. They must get away. 'FIRE,' he bellowed.

The incendiary shells hissed through the darkening sky and smashed into the shattered wood at point-blank range, transforming it into a white-hot inferno. As the shelling ceased, the men of Wotan could hear the shrieks and screams of the Americans through the high curtain of leaping flame. Here and there a GI, his uniform alive with fire, tried to crawl out of the inferno or came bursting panic-stricken into the open, burning arms held aloft in a frantic token of surrender.

But the SS troopers mowed the Amis down where they stood, until von Dodenburg yelled at last, 'Cease firing, we're pulling back. Follow me – convoy distance! And remember, you heroes, that there might be some Ami lurking out there with a bazooka. So keep a weather eye open.'

But as they swung into line, leaving the burning scene of the massacre behind them, the Amis had vanished from the bitter, war-torn landscape. Two hours later they rumbled back into a pitch-black, deserted Aachen without having been fired upon once. The swift intervention of SS Battle Group Wotan had temporarily brought 'Lightning Joe's' attempt to capture the Holy City to an abrupt and bloody halt.

CHAPTER 6

'Gentlemen, our first attack on Aachen was a complete snafu.' General Collins, at forty-eight, the youngest corps commander in the US First Army, stared aggressively at his two infantry generals and let the words sink in.

Outside, the mud-stained ambulances were rattling in and out of the Corps HQ's cobbled courtyard, bringing in the critically wounded casualties of the massacre in the woods. In a nearby office a clerk was singing, 'I'm Going to Buy a Paper Doll that I Can Call My Own', over and over again in poor imitation of Bing Crosby.

Collins frowned and told himself he would have a word with that damned chief clerk after the conference. 'I repeat, gentlemen, a complete goddam snafu.'

General Huebner, the gross, sallow-faced commander of the US Army's most experienced infantry division 'the Big Red One', opened his mouth.

Collins, blond, handsome and looking rather like an older Andy Hardy, the all-American boy, held up his hand to stop his words. 'It's okay, Clarence. I don't want any justifications, excuses, apologies. I take full responsibility for the failure of our first attack. In Seven Corps, the buck stops here.' He jerked a thumb at his own broad chest. 'Get it?'

Huebner and General Hobbs, the heavy-set commander of the 30th Infantry Division – 'Roosevelt's Butchers' as they liked to call themselves, nodded their heads in appreciation. Most of the Corps Commanders in the ETO were prepared to pass the buck when operations failed.

Outside a hoarse, beery voice was shouting. 'Mass! Anyone of you lugs going to goddam mass? If you are, get goddam fell out!' There was the sound of weary feet shuffling over the cobbles to form up and be marched off to the 'church' improvised in the barn behind the latrines.

'All right, then,' Collins went on. 'So I made a mistake. I thought the Kraut had had it and I could bounce my way into goddam Aachen. I was wrong. Now what do we do?'

'Perhaps, General,' Huebner ventured, 'we shouldn't bother. We've got all the roads we need for the advance to the Rhine. Why get ourselves bogged down in Aachen? We could seal it off and leave the Kraut to sweat it out while we barrel for the Rhine. Believe me, General,' he added urgently, 'the

capture of Aachen is going to cost us a helluva lot of doughs.'

Collins nodded. 'I agree, Clarence. The place has little military value. Its railroads are shot and the engineers tell me it'll take weeks before we can use them again for our own supplies for the advance past.' He paused and drew a deep breath, his handsome face set and worried. 'But there are other factors we have to take into consideration. Aachen will be the first major German city the US Army has captured in its two hundred-year-old history – a prestige objective in a way. Ike is very keen on that. More important, Hitler has prophesied that his empire will last a goddam thousand years, just like Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire. Thus, if we strike at Aachen, we are striking not just at a military objective, but at a shrine which is of tremendous significance for the Nazi faithful. When Aachen goes, the intelligence boys tell me, so does the man in the street's belief in the National Socialist creed. And that, gentlemen, is worth the lives of your doughs, I think.'

'All right, you fish eaters – over there,' the beery Nomcom's voice snarled, 'Gefillte fisch and bagels – over here... The good guys, next to me.' With a lot of shuffling of combat boots, the various sections of the church parade began to sort themselves out.

'Aachen will have to be captured by a systematic attack,' Collins continued, rising and walking over to the large map which decorated one wall of his office in the old Belgian château that he had taken over for his HQ during the Battle of Aachen. 'Just as the Corps did at Utah Beach and Cherbourg. No more piecemeal attacks in other words, gentlemen, going in at half cock. Okay?'

The two infantry commanders nodded.

'All right, Clarence, let's do this in a democratic fashion. What would you do, if you were me?'

'Thank God I'm not,' the commander of the Big Red One thought, but he said, 'The squeeze, General, the squeeze'. He thrust out his big powerful hand and pressed the broad fingers together. 'Cut the Krauts off from their supplies, reinforcements etc. Then, when that's done, go in for the kill.'

'You, Leland?'

Hobbs, who was not given to talk, but preferred to express himself on paper with phrases full of bombast and appeals to the soldierly patriotism of his troops, grunted, 'I concur, General –decidedly the squeeze before attempting to eliminate the enemy.'

'Good, that is exactly my own idea. The question now is – where?

Leland, I want you to get your doughs in positions around here.' He tapped the little town of Herzogenrath on the Dutch-German border on the map. 'That will be your start-line. How long would it take you to get into position?'

Hobbs shrugged. 'Two days – three at the most. My losses have been high in Holland. I'll need replacements.'

'You've got them, Leland,' Collins snapped. 'The First Army's ripple-dipple reinforcement centres have already been alerted to give you what you want in the way of bodies. Okay, let's say three days.' He turned to Huebner. 'Now Clarence, your people are already in position. All I want you to do is tidy up your line, as Monty would say, and then when we're ready to kick off the offensive, push a feint south-eastwards into the city itself, but making your main effort a drive for Verlautenheide. You and Leland will link up at this feature here – Height 239. We'll commence the offensive two October.' His voice hardened momentarily. 'And I'll expect you gentlemen to link up there eight days later. Get it?'

Somehow the young Corps Commander's confident tone irritated the much older Huebner. Lightning Joe did not seem to understand the difficulties of fighting in industrial areas like Aachen. It was nothing like the swift gallops across France where even infantry divisions could cover twenty miles a day. The grimy industrial settlements around Aachen could swallow up infantry by the battalion: before you knew it, a whole division might be engaged in fighting for some third-rate objective.

239,' he said reflectively. 'Do you know what the GIs call it, General?'

Collins, already preoccupied with the next problem, shook his head.

'Well, you know it's surmounted by a large wooden cross. You know what the folks are around here – one hundred per cent Catholic –'

'Get on with it, Clarence,' Collins snapped with a sudden bite in his voice.

'Well, sir, the forward artillery observers have spread the word about the hill dominating the whole area and about the cross. So the GIs have made up their own name for it.' Huebner allowed himself a faint smile of triumph. 'Crucifixion Hill, General... Crucifixion Hill.'

Lightning Joe Collins sat thoughtfully at his desk until he heard the doors of their sedans being slammed closed in the courtyard below and the voice of the MP sergeant bellowing, 'Guard guard – attenshun!' Smoothly the olive green Packards that contained his infantry generals drew away. 'Crucifixion Hill!' he snorted to himself and pressed the brass bell on the desk

in front of him.

His bespectacled chief clerk came in almost immediately.

'Tell Colonel Porter I'm ready for him now,' he commanded. 'And listen, Jones, get a grip on that damned crooner in your office, will you! I'm gonna get a baby doll to call my own doesn't exactly go with a high-level military conference. Savvy?'

'Yessir, General,' a flustered Jones said.

A few minutes later Colonel Porter of the First Army's OSS section appeared and gave the Corps Commander another of his sloppy civilian sixty-day-wonder salutes.'

Collins sniffed. A typical cloak-and-dagger soldier. No wonder that the Washington cocktail circuit sneered that the top-secret organisation's initial – OSS – meant the 'Office of Shush, Shush', or 'oh, so secret'.

'Well?' he inquired.

Porter, a big florid ex-Boston lawyer, whose total experience of war had been a day at Château Thierry during the 1918 'champagne campaign' in France, answered, 'The kikes are ready, if you want to look them over, General.'

Collins rose. 'Okay, let's go and see.'

A few minutes later they passed the guard of white-helmeted MPs, armed with grease-guns, into the big castle hall which housed the volunteers. They sprawled out on the linoleum floor, drinking steaming hot coffee from metal canteen cups, their leggings undone, fatigue caps at the backs of their cropped, dark heads, but as soon as they spotted the commanding general they sprang to their feet. Collins took a long look at them. They were from all arms of the service-infantry, supply, engineers – there were even a couple from a laundry unit. But in spite of their different insignia and uniforms, they had one thing in common, a rigidity of stance which Collins could not remember even seeing in the old pre-war Regular Army.

'All right, men,' he said at last. 'At ease... you may smoke again if you wish.'

There was hasty fumbling in pockets. Camels and Luckies reappeared while he waited, again noting that there was something foreign about the way the volunteers lit their cigarettes. The average GI could flip a cigarette out of the hole at the top of the pack and light it in one easy movement; these men made two separate movements out of it.

Now listen,' he said energetically. 'The Seventh Corps will be going

over to the offensive on the Aachen front again in the near future. Intelligence tells us that the Krauts – er Germans – will have little to oppose us with, except for one elite outfit, which really fouled up the Big Red One's attack yesterday.'

Again he mustered them with his keen eyes and wondered for a moment what must be going through their minds, now that they were back where they had originated, spent their youth, gone to school, made friends before being driven into exile so cruelly only a few years before.

'Now all of you men have volunteered for a special assignment. We're calling it Operation Black Guard. All of you are of German origin, speak the language fluently and are trained soldiers – a combination which is essential to the success of your mission.' He paused. 'Any questions so far?'

A tall skinny lieutenant, whose chest bore the combat infantryman's badge and the dark ribbon of the Purple Heart, said with little trace of an accent. 'Sir, we don't want you to pull any punches. Can we have it straight? What's our assignment?'

'Lieutenant Wertheim,' Colonel Porter explained hurriedly, flashing the Jewish lieutenant an angry look. 'Damn, big-mouthed kike,' he told himself.

'Well, Wertheim, if that's the way you want it, I'll give it to you straight. You're going to kill someone. But I'd better leave the details to Colonel Porter here. I just wanted to have a look at you – see what kind of fellers you were. All right, Porter, you can carry on now.'

'Attenshun!' Porter yelled.

They sprang to attention. Touching his hand to his blond hair, Collins walked out while Porter grinned behind his back. Typical West Pointer, he told himself maliciously. As hard as nails, aggressive to an extreme, ready to walk over dead bodies to further his military career, as all the guys from the Point were. All the same his regular soldier's code-of-conduct forbade him to involve himself more than necessary in the little scheme OSS in Grosvenor Square had cooked up – a scheme that might well produce more important results than one of his regular infantry regiments could. No, that kind of dirty work would have to be left to amateur soldiers like himself.

'All right,' he said when the door had been closed after the Corps Commander and the hard-faced MPs had taken up their positions again. 'Relax and get a load of this. Wertheim, you want it straight from the shoulder. Well, here it it. The OSS wants you to sneak behind the Kraut lines in German uniform. You know what that means?'

Wertheim spat drily. 'You don't need to spell it out, Colonel. We know. A short walk of an early morning if we're captured, and the firing squad.' He looked challengingly at the fat ex-lawyer. 'What we want to know is why. Don't we, guys?'

The men all around him, their dark faces set and intent, nodded.

'Okay,' Porter shrugged. It's no skin off my nose, Lieutenant. The only opposition in Aachen which is capable of stopping our doughs is an outfit called Battle Group Wotan – it's an SS unit. We want you guys to kill its commanding officer.' He consulted the piece of paper he held concealed in the palm of his hand. 'He's a Kraut called von Dodenburg. Colonel von Dodenburg. Some kind of crummy Kraut aristocrat or other.

'You guys are going to be the Joes who will ensure that if the Kraut has a son, that kid will succeed to the family title real smartish. Get me?' The challenging look gave way to a fat smile. 'Yesterday, you see, you all volunteered to become professional killers.'

BOOK II – THE DEATH SQUAD

'Do you know what we talk about all day in the cellars, Kuno? We talk about death, the various ways that one can die – that in Catholic Aachen.'

Elke Simons to Colonel von Dodenburg

CHAPTER 7

As the third week of September 1944 passed and the Americans still did not attack, the defenders of the City of Aachen settled down to the routine of a siege. Supplies were now coming through regularly from Jülich, but although Police General Donner knew that there were some twenty thousand civilians hiding out in the ruins of the old city, he abandoned all attempt to feed them.

As he told von Dodenburg, 'If they want to live in their cellars like rats, then they must learn to scavenge for themselves like rats!'

Now and then the Americans blocked the supply routes with their bombing and the Luftwaffe was called in to make airdrops. But the slow-moving, three-engined. 'Auntie Jus', as the troops called the Junkers 52s, rarely supplied them with anything worthwhile: Cellophane covers for grenades, but no grenades; boxes of official forms; great five-kilo cans of dehydrated animal fodder when they had no animals; and once over four million contraceptives, type 'Volcano'.

As Donner exclaimed angrily to von Dodenburg, 'What does that fat fool Goering think we're doing out here – fighting or fornicating?'

For the most part, enemy action was limited to Ami propaganda companies, armed with nothing more lethal than powerful radio transmitters, who played the same old popular song, 'After Every December, There is Always a May', over and over again until the bored front-line troops would cry, 'Can't you bastards play anything else?' This would usually result in a powerfully magnified voice, crying in a thick Berlin accent, 'Give yourself up, German soldiers. We Americans will treat our prisoners-of-war fairly!'

' We Americans!' the Wotan men would jeer cynically, 'Why don't you give yourselves up and we'll shorten your German-Jewish tails a little bit more for you than the Rabbi did!'

But, despite the overall quiet, there were signs that the Americans were preparing for an all-out attack on Aachen. In that third week, highly trained, aggressive Ami snipers started to appear in the suburbs nearest the lines of the First American Infantry Division – 'the Big Red One' – as von Dodenburg knew it was called from prisoners. Systematically they wormed their way into the ruins, feeling out the German strong points, testing the strength of the long line and taking a heavy toll of the SS troopers, who had grown

contemptuous of the Ami's ability to fight.

In the end, Diedenhofen, Wotan's fat, bald chief medical officer, went to von Dodenburg to complain bitterly of the activities of the snipers on the First Division's sector of the front.

'Thirty in three days, sir,' he snorted, drinking the fiery clear glass of Korn von Dodenburg had offered him in one angry gulp. 'Do you realise what that means? The bullet passes through the helmet, scalp, skull, small blood-vessels' membranes into the soft sponginess of the brain substance in the occipital lobe of the cerebral hemisphere.'

Von Dodenburg offered him another Korn. He drained it automatically. 'Then you're either paralysed or you're blind, or you can't smell anything or your memory is gone or you can't talk or you're only bleeding,' he paused for breath, 'or you're dead! It all depends on how your goddam turnip is carved when that piece of lead hits you.'

Von Dodenburg poured the angry surgeon another drink.

'Colonel,' he concluded, 'I'm heartily sick of picking out flattened slugs from young men's heads, tying up the tricky blood vessels, covering up the hole in the skull with a tantalum metal plate, knowing all the time that I'm burdening the Homeland with a human vegetable, who will have to learn how to walk, talk – even goddam smell again. Sir, you've got to do something about those snipers, or I'll be ending up in the nuthouse myself!'

Von Dodenburg smiled at the surgeon's rage. In spite of his toughness and chronic drinking, Diedenhofen cared deeply about his 'young blackguards', as he called the Wotan men; the tragic cost in human suffering was really affecting him.

The first clue to the fact that they were faced by at least one really expert sniper came in the shape of a captured copy of the US Army paper Stars and Stripes. Under the banner headline, 'New Volkssturm on Aachen front made up of old men, stomach cases, cripples with glass eyes and wooden legs', there was a small paragraph, concluding the account of the fighting on the Aachen front, detailing the activities of a Master-Sergeant Smart, 'a latter-day Alvin Yorke from the backwoods of Kentucky', who could 'thread a piece of lead through the eye of a needle at fifty paces', and who boasted that he had already 'rid the world of twenty Krauts in the last three days alone'.

Thus while both sides prepared for the great battle to come, Colonel von Dodenburg, supported by Major Schwarz, both armed with sniper's rifles,

set out on a little private war. Together they intended to outsmart Sergeant Smart.

For two days the First Division was quiet. Then on the third, two young SS men who had grown careless again in the lull, were neatly drilled through the head. They were both dead by the time Diedenhofen reached them.

On the fourth day, Schwarz and von Dodenburg sneaked out just before dawn into the shell-pocked waste of brick rubble which was no-man's land and started to study the ground carefully at a time when they guessed that Sergeant Smart from the backwoods of Kentucky would not be his usually alert self, and there would be no sun glinting on their binoculars to betray their position. Together they swept the battlefield. Their glasses came upon a reddened, burnt-out Sherman.

'Too obvious,' von Dodenburg whispered. 'Our Mr Smart wouldn't be that foolish.'

Schwarz nodded. The pillbox to the left of the Sherman?'

Hastily von Dodenburg focused his glasses. But that was not the Ami sniper's hiding place either. 'The slit's been blocked up, Schwarz. He's not in there.'

The glasses continued their sweep of the area. They passed over a rusty sheet of corrugated iron that might have once been used to roof some farmer's shed, a pile of brick rubble, and on to a series of suburban gardens or fields in which the spring-sown cabbages now rotted. Nothing!

Von Dodenburg cursed bitterly. 'Where the hell is the Ami arsehole hiding, Schwarz?'

Schwarz's black eyes narrowed. 'Sir, he can't be in the cabbages. There's no cover. The tank and pillbox are out. So?'

'Of course – the sheet of corrugated iron!'

The two officers focused their glasses on the innocuous pile of rubble surmounted by the rusty metal sheet. Nothing stirred. Everything seemed to be perfectly in order. But von Dodenburg knew that Schwarz was right. The place was the only hiding place available to the sniper. He bit his bottom lip in irritation and bewilderment. 'I'm sure the bastard's in there, Schwarz. But how are we to find out?'

Schwarz did not hesitate. Slowly, but deliberately, he raised his artificial hand, encased in its black leather glove. Von Dodenburg peered through his glasses. A white fast-moving blur. The harsh dry crack of a high-velocity rifle. Schwarz swore and withdrew his hand hurriedly. There was a

neat hole drilled through the centre of the black leather.

'Christ on a crutch,' von Dodenburg cursed excitedly, 'We've got him!'

Screaming convincingly to lull Smart's suspicions, the two of them scurried away half an hour later and started planning how they would kill the deadly Ami sniper.

In the end they decided that they had to place him at the greatest possible disadvantage by finding a spot where his position would be bathed in the maximum amount of sunlight. They found it and prayed that the September sun would do them the favour of appearing the next afternoon once they were in position.

Fortunately it did, and after firing a blind shot to attract the Ami's attention, the two officers settled in beneath their shell-crippled oak tree to wait. By late afternoon they had Smart at a disadvantage. Von Dodenburg, concealed now in the shade while Smart's position was bright with sunlight, focused his telescopic sight on the rusty sheet of corrugated iron. Suddenly something glinted. Glass! Smart's own telescopic sight.

'Schwarz,' he hissed, 'Mr Smart's showing himself!'

Schwarz wiped the sweat off his brow. Drawing a deep breath, he took off his camouflaged helmet and raised it carefully over the edge of their hiding place. Smart's rifle cracked. The slug whanged loudly against the helmet. The force of the impact flung it from Schwarz's hand. It clattered to the ground. For a moment, a surprised Schwarz did not react.

Von Dodenburg dug him in the ribs angrily. 'Scream, Schwarz – scream, Schwarz!' he hissed.

Schwarz wet his lips and screamed, throwing his head back to do so, giving it all his energy, as if he were suffering the agony of death throes. Von Dodenburg waited. He could feel the icy cold drops of sweat trickling down the small of his back. His heart was racing madly and he had to fight back the urge to blink.

Sensing victory, Smart raised his head slightly from beneath the sheet to see his thirty-third victim. It was the last thing he did.

Von Dodenburg squeezed his trigger gently. The sniper's rifle slapped against his shoulder hard. The high-velocity 9-mm slug sped through the September sunshine, and buried itself in Sergeant Smart's skull. When, after a suitable pause, they crawled out cautiously to check their victim, they found Smart sprawled on his back in the rubble, his red, leathery face relaxed in death, a neat hole between his eyes. Schwarz hawked and spat into his face.

Thereafter sniping stopped on the Aachen. The Amis returned to their saturation bombing; it was safer, it seemed.

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Now as the autumn nights closed in, the besieged city took on a deserted look. Stretched out in the pale September moonlight, its ruins bathed a ghostly silver, it offered a submissive, clear target for the night enemy – and a chance for Colonel von Dodenburg to meet the beautiful, pale-faced redhead who had so excited him at the demonstration a few days before. For although the city might look deserted from the air, it was alive with civilians at night, in spite of the bombs and Donner's chain-dogs who seemed to be everywhere. Like neolithic cave dwellers, confined to their holes during the day, the Aacheners emerged from their cellars and basements into the ruins to scavenge for fuel, to loot abandoned food stores and above all to find sufficient water for the next day.

Kuno von Dodenburg and Elke Simons met for the second time during a raid. With the flak slamming burning red balls into the sky and the searchlights stabbing icy white fingers around the darkness, searching for the Ami Fortresses, they looked at each other in silence, until finally he asked, 'Where to, Elke?'

'I don't know.'

'We have to go somewhere,' he reminded her gently.

She laughed and pressed her hand on his black leather sleeve. 'I know, Colonel. You don't want to be seen with me – what would General Donner think? And I can't be seen with you. My fellow citizens would not be too gentle with me. What a mess, eh?'

He bent down and kissed her soft cheek. 'Home?'

The cellar?' She shrugged. 'All right then, the cellar. It's the only home I've got left – all of us have got left.'

They walked swiftly down the dark street, the shadows of her fellow Aacheners scuttling around in the ruins, more sensed than seen. He held her tight to him. Now the sky in the east was ablaze yet once again.

'Bloody war,' he cursed softly, as the fiery white 'Christmas trees' began to descend slowly, indicating that Aachen was in for a full-scale attack.

'Yes, bloody war,' she echoed sadly.

In the candle-lit cellar, with the walls heaving from the first 500-pound

bombs, he put his arms around her and kissed her passionately, almost brutally. She responded wildly, with an abandon he had not expected from her, pressing her slim, rounded stomach against his. Gasping crazily, they fell on to the ancient bed, the room's sole furniture save for a chair and a crucifix.

His eager tongue burrowed deep into her open mouth. His hard hand followed the soft silken line of her stocking till his greedy fingers, striving fingers, found the wet softness they sought. The ruined city outside, Wotan, the war, the death all around him were forgotten as they writhed back and forth on the squeaking wooden bed.

Once a 1000-pound bomb landed close by and sent the whole cellar shivering with the shock, showering their sweating naked bodies with tiny flakes of plaster. They did not even notice. Their shadows, gigantically magnified by the wildly-flickering light of the single candle, continued their frantic dance. Their fevered desire consumed them; it was as if there had never been another lovemaking against the background of a world gone mad.

But the world outside could not be forgotten for ever. Lying side by side on the little bed, their bodies lathered in sweat, hands under their heads, staring at the shadows flickering on the ceiling, scarred by the week-long shellfire, she asked softly: 'Why, Kuno?'

'Why what?'

'You know. Why continue fighting? We can't beat the Amis –they'll win in the end.'

He shrugged, but still stared at the ceiling. 'Probably,' he said without emotion. 'But we must still fight on.'

She sat up, leaning on one elbow, her long red hair hanging over her face, her left breast dangling just above his mouth temptingly. 'But why?' she persisted.

'Because, my little cheetah,' he said, stroking her gleaming fire-red hair, 'there is nothing left for me and my men to do but to fight on.'

She was silent for what seemed a long time. Outside the flak thundered and the bombs howled down with stomach-churning regularity. But she did not move from her position, nor take her sad eyes from his worn, handsome face. He tried once to caress her nipple. But she shook her head.

'Do you know what we talk about all day in the cellars, Kuno?'

'Food?' he ventured.

'No, not food any more. That was at first, at the beginning of the siege. But no longer. We talk about death, the various ways that one can die – *that*

in Catholic Aachen!' She licked her suddenly dry lips. Looking at her, von Dodenburg thought how beautiful, how fragilely innocent she was. 'Some advocate poison, others' drugs or gas – but there is no gas any more.' She turned suddenly and slid her thin hand under the pillow, pulling out an old-fashioned cut-throat razor. 'My father's,' she announced simply. 'Before he was killed in the big 1942 raid.'

He sat up, alarmed. 'What the devil do you need that for?' She flicked open the blade and stared at it, fascinated as it gleamed in the faltering yellow light of the candle.

'I asked you a question, Elke. I said, what do you need it for – that razor?'

She tucked the razor under her pillow again. 'Well, not to shave my legs with, as I hear the Ami women do. Now,' her cold little hand slid along his hard stomach down to his thighs, 'I want to make love again. Can I excite you?'

He did not see the tears in her eyes, as his greedy hand sought and found her nipple.

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But the clandestine nightlife of the dying city was not all sadness. At least Schulze and his one-legged companion, Sergeant Matz, did not think so. Night after night they staggered through the blacked-out streets, avoiding Donner's chain-dogs, or if they could not avoid them, slugging them swiftly, before clattering off into the shadows in their great heavy dice-beakers, laughing uproariously.

Blundering drunkenly through the blackout curtain into the SA man's cellar, they would usually smash him in the face to send him flying into the nearest fire bucket – 'just in case he starts getting too big for his boots' – ripping off their jackets in the same instant and announcing their presence to the giggling whores by raising their left legs and venting two enormous farts.

The whores loved them. Schulze and Matz could do no wrong, even when they were blind drunk, which happened frequently in that last week of September, after a 'hunting commando' had discovered an abandoned schnapps distillery and every platoon in Wotan had its own fifty-litre carboy of fiery liquor at hand. As soon as Schulze would bellow; 'All right, my ladies, I'm going to dance a mattress polka this night! Get those rags off at the

double!' they would respond with alacrity, ripping off their underwear like virgin brides on the wedding night.

Even when Matz, as drunk as his senior NCO, would insist on taking off his artificial leg, 'so that I can get on the job better', the whores were not offended. They would tolerate the undersized sergeant's peculiarities, as he hopped towards them, completely naked, on one leg, big hands outstretched to grab the nearest whore's breasts, crying, 'Stand fast, girls! Hold on to something quick! Because I'm going to hit you worse than a 88 mm shell at close range!'

As an exhausted Schulze commented one night, his head nestled in the big blonde's breasts, while a brunette wiped the sweat off his naked chest and stomach, 'Matz, you cunning, one-legged fart-cannon, this is a dream come true.' He threw out a big hand to draw in the roomful of drunken naked women, being served by the downcast little SA man, who had now added a black eye to his swollen, green-coloured nose. 'Who would have believed it, eh, you puffed-up pineapple-shitter!' He shook his head in disbelief. 'My own private whore house Matz, old cock, at this moment, I could die happy.'

And while the men of Wotan enjoyed their time out of war, Lieutenant Wertheim's men, their faces blackened, their bodies clad in the hated uniform of the German Wehrmacht, slipped out into the cold autumn darkness, night after night, to train for their mission.

CHAPTER 8

The sound was unlike anything the Aacheners had heard before. It started in the distance as the sun slid up over the ruin-jagged horizon and they prepared to return to their hideouts with the loot of the night, a dull groaning noise unlike any of the other terrible noises of war they had heard in these last few years. Twice it sounded. Bright pink flashes sparkled to the west. For a moment the shabby night creatures seemed mesmerised. Then the low roar became a scream, a baleful, angry scream – its fury elemental, but man-made and precise. They scattered, pelting madly down the ruined streets for the safety of their cellars. The enemy artillery shells, the first to strike the old city, burst with a mighty antiphonal crash. Dismembered bodies flew everywhere, the ruins splashed red with the blood of the victims. Men and women lay writhing in agony in the gutters. As the Amis settled down to the dawn bombardment, the sun revealed itself in its full frightening beauty, hanging in the pale blue sky like a blood-red ball. It was seven thirty on the morning of October 1st, 1944. Aachen itself had now become the front line.

Vicious purple tongues of flame leaped up from shattered rooftops all over the city. Weakened buildings collapsed everywhere. Military vehicles parked in the streets were up-ended or flung high in the air by direct hits. A convoy of horse-drawn goulash cannons, field kitchens to normal soldiers, trotting down the Komphausstrasse received a direct hit. The drivers, their mates, their tired skinny nags and four hundred litres of 'giddi-up soup' disappeared in an instant. Shells ploughed into the cupola of Charlemagne's Cathedral. Huge chunks of masonry started to fall on the terrified men and women sheltering below. They ran terrified into the Jakobsstrasse to be mown down by the red-hot, fist-large pieces of shrapnel. A military stable at the end of the little street was hit and the piteous whinnying of the horses mingled with the cries and shouts of the dying humans. Some of the horses stampeded out of the sudden inferno. Manes and tails blazing a fiery red, brown eyes wide with terror, they clattered down the street scattering all before them.

The merciless shelling seemed to have no pattern. It was aimless and incessant. Its razor-sharp, deadly shrapnel scythed down everything in front of it. In their foxholes the Wotan men huddled close together and cowered in

abject misery as the earth shuddered and shook, thanking a God they no longer believed in that they were being spared – at least temporarily – while the civvies took the merciless pounding of the Ami guns.

And still the enemy artillery kept firing. The screams of their shells had now merged into one continuous cyclonic roar. Ami mortars joined in, dropping their 3-inch bombs into the centre of the city with obscene plops, the blasts of their explosions tearing out the lungs of the civilians cowering in the rubble. The new enemy rocket batteries followed with a fluttering chromatic whine, showering Aachen with the fiery, spark-trailing canisters, which exploded with such force that the dark red blood spurted from the civilians' ears and noses. As the sun's rays, growing warmer every minute, cleared away the dawn mist, the city was wreathed in thick yellow, choking acrid fumes and a fine cloying dust.

And then, as suddenly as it had started, the initial barrage ended, leaving behind it an echoing silence. Awed, white-eyed with shock, shaking their dust-covered heads to clear away the ringing noise, the shabby civilians rose slowly to their feet and stared at the new shape of their ancient city.

Aachen had stood in the path of many invaders in its two-thousand-year history. Once the Amis began to push into the city, there would be no leaving the refuge of their cellars at night; and SS Police General Donner – *Devil Donner*, as they were beginning secretly to call the hideous battle commander – would not waste precious supplies of food on them. They would have to fend for themselves.

The looting started almost immediately. Goods trains lined up outside the Hauptbahnhof were broken into by a mass of screaming, almost hysterical women. They grabbed cases of tinned fruits and the standard Wehrmacht ration meat cans – the notorious 'Old Man'. A patrol of chain-dogs tried to stop them. The women tore them to pieces. When they had finished looting the trains, the four MPs were found, trampled to death and naked on the platform. In one case, the crazed women had thrust the MPs' crescent-shaped, silver-metal badge deep into the dead, blood-covered man's anus.

A rumour flashed through the crowd that one of city's great department stores was being looted. Dragging their stolen tins of fruit and meat behind them in little handcarts, they streamed towards the store, fighting their way in a mob through the doors or crunching across the shattered glass debris of the shell-blasted windows. An old, bald-headed man in the shabby, but well-brushed frock coat of another era and a stiff wing-collar tried to stop the

invasion. An enraged housewife in a coat made from a dyed blanket knocked him to the ground.

And the looting began all over again. The women grabbed anything in sight. If they discovered a moment later an item was useless, they simply dropped it. Soon the floor of the food department, where Donner had used the refrigerators to keep the supplies intended for Aachen's fighting men, was a centimetre-thick carpet of sticky, slippery mud, made up of flour, honey, syrup, jam and condensed milk, all dropped or overturned by the screaming mob of women. They swarmed back and forth, grabbing coats, dresses, shoes – anything that could be worn or sold on the flourishing night-time black market. Suddenly whistles started to blow.

'The head-hunters – Devil Donner's head-hunters are coming!' a fat woman with glasses screamed.

'Devil Donner's head-hunters!' a hundred hysterical voices took up the cry of alarm.

Panic-stricken the women streamed out of the store, carrying their loot with them. Outside the debris-littered square, hefty middle-aged Army MPs were dropping heavily on to the cobbles, weapons at the ready. They formed up rapidly into line, Schmeissers levelled at the frightened but determined women. Suddenly the senior NCO, a florid-faced sergeant with his chest covered in decorations from the old war, nodded to his men to lower their weapons.

'All right, let the bitches through. Hard times are coming, they might as well have their little bit of loot.'

The women streamed through the cordon, silent, subdued, eyes fixed demurely on the ground, as if ashamed of themselves.

They had just turned into the Grosskoelmstrasse when someone yelled, 'Horses, dead horses!'

Before them lay a long line of singed dead horses, shot a few minutes before by the chain-dogs. They lay sprawled out everywhere, their skinny ribs showing through their moth-eaten skins. Knives appeared, as if by magic.

'Fresh meat,' the woman in the dyed blanket coat cried in delight. 'Come on!' She flung herself on the nearest animal, plunging her knife into the soft flesh of its flank.

Like the furies themselves, the other women followed suit, their hands red to the wrists, cutting and slashing at the flesh in a desperate attempt to get

a share of the precious meat before it was all gone.

'Animals – pure animals,' Donner murmured metallically, as he and von Dodenburg watched from above. The Police General fixed von Dodenburg with his glassy-eyed hideous stare. 'That down there is just the beginning, von Dodenburg,' he said carefully. 'Just the beginning.' Devil Donner brought his terrible face closer to the younger man's. 'Soon all of Germany is going to be like that down there, a pack of whining undisciplined animals, snarling in the dirt of the gutter for the offal cast them by the victors, if we don't manage to stop the Amis here.' His crippled hand clenched tightly and his voice rose. 'Von Dodenburg, you must hold Aachen for me, whatever the cost!'

CHAPTER 9

The three German half-tracks emerged from the farmyard into the eerie light of the false dawn. They seemed to make a deafening noise as they ground down the stony track, and the lean, dark-skinned lieutenant standing up in the first vehicle bit his lip, as if he feared that the noise would alert the enemy.

A sentry loomed up out of the coils of mist floating a metre above the fields and the curtain of vapour fogging the narrow beams of his half-track. 'Wotan?' he challenged, his machine pistol held at the ready, his body protected carefully by a ruined Sherman.

'Wagner,' the lieutenant answered promptly, with only a trace of a Viennese accent.

The sentry relaxed. 'Pass, friend.'

The lieutenant raised his hand in signal to the other two vehicles, a grey ghost in the bleak glow of their headlights. 'Any sign of the Amis, sir?' the young SS man inquired anxiously as the lieutenant's driver thrust home first gear.

Not yet, soldier. We're just back from a recce. They must still be eating their Ami bacon and eggs – they never go to war on empty stomachs, they tell me.'

'Lucky sods,' the SS man replied. 'I've had nothing but a bowl of giddi-up soup in the last twelve hours.'

'Tell the chaplain,' the lieutenant snapped unsympathetically, as the half-track jerked forward. 'Perhaps he'll give you a signed certificate for a sausage sandwich.'

'Kiss my shitty arse,' the sentry cursed. But the half-tracks were already vanishing into the thick dawn mist. He yawned and went back to his vigil, his stomach rolling persistently at the thought of the canteen of 'black's sweat' – black coffee and black bread – which would be his breakfast in another hour's time.

Steadily the big half-tracks, laden with panzer grenadiers, rumbled towards Aachen, well behind German lines now, but still cautious as if every bend might conceal a platoon of infiltrators, heralding the all-out Ami attack which the defenders of the city had been expecting for nearly twenty-four hours now.

Suddenly the lead half-track came to a halt. The other two rumbled to a rusty-tracked stop behind it. While the panzer grenadiers gripped their weapons in sweaty palms, straining their eyes to penetrate the October morning mist, the lieutenant swung himself easily over the bullet-pocked metal side of his own vehicle. Dropping on to one knee behind the rear track, he waited tensely, feeling the morning dew soaking into his breeches.

The lights were getting closer now. His brain alert, his pulse racing, he counted the headlights. One... two... three... four. Four trucks heading towards them slowly. Tension built up inside him with an electric crackle. Would they turn off at the little muddy crossroads two hundred metres ahead, or would they continue on the side road and bump head-on the three half-tracks, whose headlights were now extinguished and engines switched off?

The four trucks came closer and closer. The lead driver began to decrease speed. The lieutenant, crouched in the grass, felt the sweat start to trickle coldly down the small of his back. He raised his machine-pistol. Had they spotted them? The lead truck braked. He could hear the squeal of the hard rubber tyres on the wet cobbles. He ducked swiftly. The thin blue beams swept by where his head had been. In the half tracks, the panzer grenadiers froze into fearful immobility. The lieutenant swallowed hard, but the first truck was turning off. It was taking the other fork, and its driver had not spotted them, for he was already gathering speed again. One by one the rest followed suit, while the frightened lieutenant prayed fervently that their drivers were as unobservant as the first one. Within a matter of minutes the sound of their motors was dying away in the distance and all was silence again save for the slow chattering of an Ami machine-gun a long way off in the west. The lieutenant breathed a sigh of relief and rose stiffly to his feet. His hands shaking slightly, he walked slowly back to his half-track.

'You can start up again,' he ordered the driver.

The lieutenant climbed aboard and slumped down wearily next to a man wearing the stars of a sergeant-major.

'Great crap on the Christmas Tree,' the swarthy NCO breathed in relief, 'I thought they had got us by the short hairs just then, Lieutenant!'

As the first half-track began to jolt its way up the little secondary road again, the officer nodded. 'Yes, Fein,' Lieutenant Wertheim answered in English, 'you ain't shitting.' He checked his watch. Nearly ten and still the fog was holding as Porter's tame weather man had promised him it would. Thank God, although the fog cover had the disadvantage of making it damn difficult

for them to find their base – the shattered farmhouse on the western outskirts, which Porter's man in Aachen had promised him was deserted and one hundred per cent safe.

By now his nerves were thoroughly keyed up. They had been behind Kraut lines for four hours, and his mind was oscillating crazily between two impulses – the need for caution on this last lap of their mission, and the need to get under cover before the fog lifted and they ran out of time.

The three half-tracks clattered through what appeared to be an abandoned hamlet. Their tracks made a hell of a row on the cobbles, Wertheim thought fearfully. He glanced at his men. They were as pale and tense as he was, eyeing the gaping glass windows of the grey stone houses, weapons at the ready, as if they expected the SS to appear at them at any moment. The lead vehicle, provided like the rest from First Army Ordnance's special park of captured enemy weapons, swung round a corner. There were GIs sprawled out everywhere in the extravagant postures of the dead. They were a gory, heart-moving sight, but they filled Wertheim with a sense of relief; for he knew that they were still the dead of the earlier offensive and indicated that no Krauts had been in this area during the period of lull. The Germans would have buried the corpses long ago.

'Lieutenant.' It was Fein.

'Yes?'

'There it is – Crucifixion Hill.'

Fein pointed a dirty forefinger at the hill which had suddenly appeared out of the grey gloom. 'That's the big wooden cross, Porter told us about in the briefing.'

Swiftly Wertheim focused his glasses. All round, the mist lay like thick grey pile carpet. But the height stood out clearly, its great cross an unmistakable landmark. They had made it, passing through the German lines from almost one end to the other. The Kraut front, facing the Big Red One, would be up there near the hill, perhaps only a matter of a mile away. They were right on target. Their farm hideout couldn't be far away now.

'Okay, driver,' he whispered, lowering his voice instinctively, 'take the next right. That should lead you on to the dirt road, going up to the farm.'

Just as the yellow October sun started to burn away the last of the mist, the three half-tracks began to edge their way down a narrow bumpy dirt road in first gear, the disguised GIs holding their weapons at the ready.

But their caution was unnecessary. As they ground closer to the holed

roof of the little farmhouse, they saw that fields on either side, churned up by shell-fire, were also filled with American dead from the previous attack. The Krauts had not been in this area for a long time either, just as Porter had promised them. In spite of his obvious Bostonian anti-Semitism, he had at least planned the mission well.

Half an hour later they had the three half-tracks under cover, had eaten, using the special self-heating cans so that they would not have to betray their presence in the smelly, deserted farm to any curious Kraut with nothing better to do than to run his field glasses over the forlorn, battle-torn countryside. Then they settled down to sleep. But, despite his tiredness, Wertheim lay awake. Even though he told himself that Porter's contact man would not be arriving from Aachen for another two hours at least, his nerves were jangling like telephone wires from the Benzedrine he had taken the night before. In the end he gave up and, rising stiffly to his feet, went outside to urinate against the farmhouse wall.

The sentry scurried into sight, alarmed by the noise of the hot urine gushing down the stones. When he saw the officer he was embarrassed, trying to salute and lower his rifle at the same time. Wertheim grinned at the soldier's predicament. 'Do you really expect me to return your salute with my don g in my hand, Rosen?' he asked. 'It ain't exactly the textbook way of doing things, is it?'

Rosen was a twenty-year-old from Berlin whose father had been a captain in the Prussian Foot Guards Regiment Number Four in the old war and had died at Dachau despite his 'Blue Max' gained for bravery at Verdun in '16. Now he blushed furiously. 'I didn't know it was you, sir,' he said stupidly.

'Who did you think it was then – Betty Grable without her pants? I can't sleep. Too much dope. I'm going to have a look-see at that hill up there. Top-Kick Fein is in charge while I'm away. Kay?'

'Yessir,' Rosen snapped, standing to attention as if he were in the old Prussian Foot Guards himself or back in training at Fort Bliss, instead of deep behind enemy lines on a life-or-death mission.

Shouldering his grease-gun and checking that his two grenades were still attached to his webbing, Wertheim set off cautiously in the direction of the hill feature which dominated the area, hopping expertly from cover to cover as he did so. He had been a trained and experienced infantry officer before he had volunteered for this mission; that was after he had heard his

sole surviving relative, his sister Rosie, had died of a 'heart attack' at Theresienstadt. That, at least, was the Swiss Red Cross's report. Rosie, who had been the star girl athlete of her high school in Vienna and the best amateur skier of her age and class in the whole of Upper Austria. That day something had snapped within him and afterwards he knew he would never be the same man again. Now the future no longer interested him. Survival neither. Not even the ordinary animal pleasures of his fellow soldiers – women, food, drink. The only thought present in his mind, save sorrow at Rosie's memory, was that of murder – how he could kill the maximum number of Krauts before they killed him.

Twenty minutes or so later he was sheltering behind a knocked-out civilian Opel truck and surveying the hill with his binoculars, shading the glass carefully with his free hand to prevent it glinting in the slanting rays of the cold October afternoon sun. But he could spot no activity on the crown below the great cross save for a thin trail of blue-grey smoke, which might be coming from some careless soldier's cooking fire.

In the end he gave up; Porter had told him that the hill would play an important role in what was to come, but he would only learn the full details from the fat OSS man's spy from the beleaguered city. Slipping away as carefully as he had approached, he made his way back to the farm, accompanied by the ever-increasing roar of the afternoon barrage that heralded the all-out attack of the morrow. He had almost reached their hideout, when a strange slithering sound made him drop to one knee, grease-gun at the ready, his heart thumping with apprehension. Someone was approaching stealthily through the long grass and bracken to the west of the farmhouse. He licked his suddenly dry lips and clicked off his safety catch. The intruder, whoever he might be, was only a matter of yards away now. He raised his grease-gun. Directly ahead, he could see the tops of the bushes waving slightly. He was in there.

Making himself breathe more calmly, knowing that his aim would be unsure if he were forced to open fire, he swallowed and called softly. 'The devil?'

For what seemed an age, nothing happened, except that the soft crawling sound ceased at once. Yet Wertheim sensed that someone was out there in the long grass, as tense and as frightened as he was himself.

He repeated the code word in German, curling his finger around the trigger of the grease-gun, ready to fire if he had made a mistake, 'The devil?'

Hesitantly, a scared voice answered only a score yards away, 'Devil's Shield.'

Wertheim clambered to his feet, his dark eyes shining with relief. 'Over here,' he called urgently.

For a moment nothing happened. Then a fat little man with a shining black eye, dressed in what Wertheim recalled with a shock of recognition was the uniform of the Nazi bully boys from the SA, popped up from the grass, his plump face gleaming with sweat in spite of the cold.

'It's me,' he said in a shaky voice. 'Colonel Porter's man from Aachen.'

CHAPTER 10

At nine o'clock precisely on the morning of October 2nd, 'Roosevelt's Butchers' attacked. The German defenders of the northern flank had been expecting the attack ever since the great artillery bombardment had started. Still they were caught off guard in their bunker line. No matter how long you sat and waited, an attack always took you by surprise.

A loud explosion. The first of the bunkers shuddered violently, like a ship in a high sea striking a trough. It was followed by a rapid series of explosions that plastered the whole line, held by second-class troops of one of Donner's 'stomach battalions'. Here and there the ashen-faced defenders panicked and tried to bolt outside. Their NCOs swiftly forced them back to their positions with curses and kicks.

The softening-up bombardment lasted twenty minutes. It stopped abruptly, leaving behind it a sinister and unnatural silence. The stomach battalion men held their breath tensely and wondered what new horrors were going to be sprung upon them. Peering through the observation slits, their officers and NCOs could see a grey-fogged lunar landscape, stark, ruined and desolate. The minutes ticked by in leaden foreboding.

Suddenly a heavy Ami machine-gun began to fire, hammering away like an angry woodpecker. White tracer sailed through the air, slow at first, but growing faster with every instant. The first 50-mm slugs started to patter against the thick concrete walls of the bunkers. The observers ducked instinctively, although they were safe enough. Everywhere now, other Ami heavy machine-guns joined in, aiming at the observation slits in an attempt to blind the bunker line.

'Stand by,' the NCOs barked. 'Here they come!'

The stomach battalion men sprang to their positions. In the command bunker, a choleric battalion commander who had lost half his stomach at Stalingrad whirled the handle of the field telephone and bellowed at the artillery commander dug in five hundred metres to the rear, 'Get those shitty Ami MGs for me, will you! But quick!'

Moments later the big howitzers crashed into action. Great half-metre-long shells hissed through the air, smashing into the Ami machine-gun battalion. One by one the machine-pins, easily located by their tracer, were

knocked out. The Ami infantry, waiting in the long grass at the edge of the stream which fronted the bunker line, were without protection. But there was no stopping now.

Their officers rose to their feet. Whistles were blown. Red-faced irate noncoms bellowed orders and kicked those to their feet who were too slow.

'At the double,' the battalion commander roared.

Carrying the duckboards that were to provide dry paths across the stream, they lumbered heavily through the sodden fields of sugar beat and turnips. A moving target is less easily hit than a stationary one, as their officers had drummed into them while they had been training for the great attack. Now they operated on that theory. A young second lieutenant, with the build of a football player, doubled forward ahead of the rest, duckboard clutched tight to his chest. He splashed into the stream and slapped it into place.

'There's your goddam bridge!' he yelled at the men behind him.

A second later the first German bullet slammed into him and he fell face forward into the water, his helmet rolling on one side.

The German machine-gunners hissed into high-pitched action. The first wave of Amis was scythed down in a flash, turning the dirty water red with their blood. The second wave came on, using their fallen comrades as bridges, trampling pitilessly on their torn, bleeding bodies.

For a moment they were in blind ground. Then they came up over the far bank of the stream, screaming angrily. In their midst they had half a dozen soldiers with strange unwieldy packs on their shoulders, bouncing up and down rapidly as they doubled forward.

'Jesus, Mary, Joseph,' one of the stomach battalion men gasped. 'Flame-throwers!'

'Hold your stupid Bavarian trap!' an officer snapped angrily, not taking his eyes from the observation slit.

The first of the flame-throwers went into action. While the infantry men to his right and left poured a stream of covering fire at the nearest bunker, he doubled in from the side, safe now because the bunker was momentarily blinded. At ten-yard range, he pressed the trigger of his terrible weapon. A long tongue of blue-red flame, tinged with oily brown, blazed out and wrapped itself momentarily around the bunker. It disappeared in an instant, leaving a steaming blackened mark on the concrete. In front of the soldier the grass had vanished completely. He pressed the trigger again. The

flame embraced the bunker greedily once more. Another soldier doubled forward, crouched low, an explosive charge tied loosely to the end of a ten-foot pole. Skilfully he poked it through the nearest slit. They heard a thick muffled crump and the sound of muted screaming. Heavy black smoke started to pour from the slit. The Amis waited.

Suddenly a blackened, bare-headed figure stumbled out of the bunker's rear entrance, his clothes in rags, his arms held high above his head.

'Comrade... comrade,' he croaked weakly.

The man with the flame-thrower straightened up. He could tell from the Kraut's boots that he was an officer. He would have a Luger and a Luger would fetch a small fortune on the black market in Paris's Pig Alley, GI slang for Pigalle. He began to run heavily towards him to get his hands on the pistol before the rest, but in that instant the officer fired. The Ami fell without a sound.

'He killed Smitty!' a furious voice yelled. 'The son of a bitch shot Smitty!'

A good dozen men turned their weapons on the German. officer. His body was whirled round by the impact of the concentrated fire. The GIs rushed and pumped the rest of their magazines into his twitching body. Still angry, they threw grenade after grenade into the bunker's rear entrance. After a while no more sound came from within.

The attack went on. By eleven o'clock the first bunker line had been taken. The stomach battalion was wiped out, the bunkers and their support trenches awash with blood. Mangled bodies, American and German, lay everywhere, locked together in death. And in the wraith-like smoke that covered the ground ahead, their commander staggered back to his own second line of defence, a bayonet thrust through his throat.

Donner's HQ at the Hotel Quellenhof on the outskirts of Aachen was in a state of acute alarm. Staff officers ran up and down the corridors, where genteel elderly guests had once walked to take the waters, maps clutched in their elegant hands. Dispatch-riders, their ankle-length leather coats splattered with mud from top to bottom, roared in and out of the courtyard. Black-clad SS NCOs bellowed orders to their men to form up, ready for instant action.

But von Dodenburg, who had experienced this kind of situation many times in the last five years of war, did not seem to share Donner's alarm.

'General,' he said firmly, tapping the big wall map. 'The break through at Rimburg cannot be the main push. Look at the distance the Amis will have

to cover before they are within striking range of the city itself.'

'But von Dodenburg,' Donner protested. 'They are pouring men into the gap they've forced there. Our observers arc pretty shaken, I realise that, but they estimate that the Amis have passed through at least three battalions, and a prisoner states that the whole of the 30th Infantry Division is involved, plus support troops.'

Von Dodenburg nodded his agreement. 'I don't dispute that, General. But is Rimburg their *Schwerpunkt*? Is it really where they're concentrating all of their men?' He answered his own question. 'Definitely not.' He tapped the area on the map held by General Huebner's First Division. 'This is where our main attack will come. After all, the Amis there are almost in Aachen's suburbs.'

'But they haven't made a move yet, von Dodenburg,' Donner protested, taking out his glass eye and polishing it. 'To the north, however, they must have already gained a kilometre since this morning. What are you going to do about it?'

Von Dodenburg took a deep breath. 'I'm going to take a calculated risk, General. If I commit Wotan there and the Amis attack on the southern flank, we are sunk. You could say goodbye to Aachen then. I haven't got enough men to stop an all-out drive on both fronts. Rimburg is the lesser evil for me.'

Donner sucked his yellow false teeth thoughtfully for a moment. 'All right, von Dodenburg, so be it. We'll wait with your Wotan until we see how the other flank develops. But what happens if you're wrong?'

Von Dodenburg forced a grin. 'Then, my dear General, we are definitely in the shit – very deep in the shit indeed.'

All afternoon 'Roosevelt's Butchers' continued their drive towards Rimburg, steadily punching holes in Donner's line and forcing his second-class troops to retreat to new positions. The fields were shell-pitted everywhere, grass torn and trampled. Abandoned, shattered farmhouses bore the signs of companies and battalions which no longer existed. The cobbled country roads were lined by trees, broken off half-way by the shellfire, the roads themselves littered with jagged shrapnel like the scabs of an ugly disease.

Now the 30th Infantry was taking serious casualties. Some of the reinforcements, culled from the Service of Supply and thrown into the line as riflemen after a mere three weeks' infantry course, were hit within five minutes of entering their first battle. Some survived the whole afternoon and

found themselves as acting private first class, acting corporal, acting buck sergeant commanding platoons that had been reduced to five or six men.

But the casualties did not worry Hobbs. The big general confidently told his attentive staff, 'My doughs have got their feet over the dashboard. We're nearly there. The Krauts are bugging out. They'll be creaming their skivvies by nightfall.' Privately he started to compose the divisional communique for the morrow, full of resounding bombastic phrases about, 'living up to the glorious traditions of the 30th US Infantry Division... never in the history of land warfare... unparalleled in the annals of the United States Army'. He had just arrived at 'and so I say to you, officers and men of the 30th US Infantry Division, that this day all America is watching you', when he was called to the phone by one of his aides. It was Colonel Sutherland of the 119th Infantry Regiment.

Sutherland did not pull his punches. 'General,' he gasped urgently, 'the Kraut has got us by the short and curlies up here at Rimburg.'

'What happened?'

'My point bumped into half a dozen flak wagons. And they're mounted with four 20-mm flak cannons each! Now they've got the whole lead battalion pinned down in an area of five hundred square yards. As soon as anyone dares put up his head, he gets it blown off.'

'Hold yer water, Sutherland, hold yer water,' Hobbs said soothingly. 'I'll fix it. The Division's got a release on the Ninth TAC Air Force. I'll have the mediums up there within the hour.'

'You'd better, General,' Sutherland answered shortly. 'Because if you don't, there won't be much of the 119th left soon. Over.'

'Over and out,' Hobbs said perfunctorily and told himself once again that the guys in the line never saw the big picture – that's why they invariably panicked when something went wrong. He talked to his G.I. 'Get me Air will you – and make it snappy!'

The twin-engined Mitchells came in at 500 mph. Flak screamed up at them. A bomber exploded in mid-air. When the black smoke cleared, all that was left was a single wing floating down like a broken leaf. Still they came on until they were over the front line. The deadly black eggs started to tumble out of their silver bellies. The American soldiers stared upwards happily, careless of the Kraut fire now.

'Go on, boys,' they yelled. 'Give em hell!' But their enthusiastic cries died on their lips when they saw the direction the bombs were taking.

'Hit the dirt, guys a young officer up front cried urgently, choked with sudden fear.

He was too late, for the whole weight of the bombing had descended upon the American section of the front. They were submerged in a screaming inferno. The whole of the lead battalion was dead or dying. Frantic officers rose to their feet, bracing themselves against the trembling earth, unconcerned by the flying shrapnel, firing signal flares high into the air. The Germans at the flak wagons, a matter of two hundred yards away, reacted immediately. They fired the same colour flares, assuming – correctly – that the Ami pilots above them would think that the first set of flares was a trick to put them off their target. Then the battlefield was covered in thick yellow explosive fumes and nothing could save the 119th.

By dusk, Hobbs's advance had stalled completely and the survivors of the 119th, shocked and bitter called the Ninth TAC Air Force, the 'American Luftwaffe'. Hobbs ordered an inquiry.

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In Aachen, a nervous von Dodenburg did not know of the failure of Hobbs's attack till much later. All that long afternoon with the rumble of the Ami artillery getting closer and closer, and the alarming reports of further Ami advances flooding into Donner's HQ, he wondered whether he had made the right decision. Twice he contacted the look-out post on Hill 239 which overlooked the Big Red One's positions and asked for news. But the observer's report was laconic and disappointing.

'Nothing to report from up here, sir. Unless you want to know about the Ami over there who's got the shits and is always using the latrine.'

Colonel von Dodenburg did not want to know.

It started to get dark. Still nothing from the First Division's front. He began to wonder if he had not made a major tactical mistake. Donner did not say anything, but his glassy stare indicated that he thought von Dodenburg certainly had. At five-thirty, at the start of another Ami bombardment of the old city, he put his panzer grenadiers on red alert. They were to stand by their half-tracks, ready to be thrown into the battle on the 30th Infantry's front. Still a voice within him warned him to hold them back. He hung on.

At six, he decided he must make some sort of attempt to find out what the Big Red One's intention was. He called Schwarz to his office. 'Schwarz,

I'm going to take out a patrol to Height 239. One can cover the whole Ami front up there. Even though it's dark, I think I should be able to spot any large-scale concentration.'

The one-armed major, who knew how his CO had sweated out the afternoon, nodded his agreement. 'I think you are right, sir, but just one thing. I'd like to go with you sir. I'm getting sick of sitting on my arse here in the HQ.'

Von Dodenburg made his mind up quickly. 'All right, I'll take you, Matz as driver and Schulze as muscle. By the way, where is Schulze?'

But the ex-docker was nowhere to be found. He wasn't even in the kitchen with the kitchen bulls, indulging in his second favourite activity – scrounging food.

In the end Matz volunteered to find him. 'I think I know where he is, sir,' he told von Dodenburg with a knowing look.

The CO smiled thinly. 'Don't tell me – I can guess, Matz. But tell him if he isn't back here in battle equipment ready to go within thirty minutes, he's going to be the unhappiest private soldier in Battle Group Wotan.'

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'So this is where you are, you randy ox,' Matz gasped, as he pushed aside the little SA man with one careless sweep of his hand. 'I've been looking for you everywhere.'

'Piss off,' Schulze said without rancour. 'Can't you see I'm busy, you horrible garden dwarf!' He was naked save for his dice-beakers and pistol-belt. He always maintained that 'a good soldier's ready for battle – or bed – at any time!' And Matz could see that the big sergeant-major was ready for both. Putting his hand on the blonde's pudding-like breast, he gave it a hard squeeze and stuck his tongue in her left ear, ignoring the red-faced, panting Matz.

'Schulze,' he pleaded. 'Come on, get your duds on. You're needed.'

'Didn't I tell you piss off?' Schulze breathed, his voice muffled. 'I don't fancy a threesome tonight. Go away into the corner and tackle the five-fingered widow, or have you hurt your wrist again?'

Matz ignored the insult. 'Schulze, the CO is going up the walls. You're wanted on patrol. We're off up to Height 239 – wherever the hell that is – you, me, the CO and that crazy man Schwarz. Now come on!'

Schulze took his hand from the whore's breast. 'Oh, you piss Henry, Matz, why didn't you tell me before?'

'I did, you horn-ox. But you wouldn't listen. Now in heaven's name, get on your hind legs and let's get the hell out of here before the CO has the eggs off us.'

Clamping his helmet firmly on his big head, Schulze turned to the whore d bowed gravely over her hard calloused hand, as if he were a hero in one of those Viennese operetta films that were so popular that autumn in the Reich, and she were some society heroine.

'Madam,' he declared, 'I'm afraid I must leave. The trumpets are sounding and the drums of war are beating. My duty is at the front where I shall ride at the head of my men. Till then I beg you to wait loyally for me. Hark, the cannon are beginning to roar.' He raised his left leg and gave vent to one of his celebrated farts. His voice back to normal, he added. 'And mind you keep those knees of yours crossed till I get back. I don't want that dirty old rear-echelon stallion getting it up.' He indicated the SA man.

Laughing uproariously, Schulze rushed out into the street, naked as he was, his clothes in a careless bundle beneath his arm, with Matz limping after him as best he could.

The SA man waited till the sound of their boots on the cobbles had died away completely. Then he raised himself. 'I'm going out,' he announced.

The girls did not react.

'I said I'm going out,' he repeated.

'All right, all right,' said the blowsy blonde whore, busy pulling on her black panties again. 'Take off! Don't give me a heart attack about it. Piss off!' She turned round, ignoring him as if he were less than the cockroaches which crawled up the dirty concrete walls of the cellar.

The SA man clenched his fists. 'Sow,' he cursed under his breath. 'Just you wait. One day soon you'll be singing a different shitting tune.'

But he controlled himself in time. Thrusting up his collar, he pushed aside the blackout curtain and stepped into the pink-tinged night. The Jewboys would be very grateful for the information he had about SS Colonel Kuno von Dodenburg – very grateful indeed.

CHAPTER 11

The little VW jeep, driven by Matz, ground by the straggling rows of houses that lined the country road, with Schulze eyeing the apparently deserted street suspiciously, finger on the trigger of his Schmeisser. At the least sign of movement, he would fire. Although they were still within the German lines, the big NCO had an uneasy feeling that everything was not well.

'What's the matter with you, Schulze?' von Dodenburg sitting beside him asked. 'Wind up?'

'Of course not, sir,' Schulze answered firmly. 'But you can't be too careful – and I wouldn't want to drive right into the Ami lines.'

'What? And miss that real coffee and real cigarettes they keep promising us in their leaflets?' von Dodenburg said.

'They can stick their real coffee and real cigarettes right up their fat Ami arses,' Schulze growled.

The little VW left the hamlet. A heavy, unnatural silence, broken only by the persistent rumble of the heavies in the distance, hung over the rough, winding road leading up to Height 239. They passed what had once been a thick pine wood. Now the trees were flattened and the German convoy which had been sheltering in its cover was scattered everywhere – overturned Opel trucks, burnt-out VW jeeps, a shattered armoured car, still glowing a dull red with the heat, and dead bodies everywhere.

'Oh, my aching back,' Matz groaned at the wheel, 'there's enough roasted meat in that wood to feed half the Wehrmacht for a whole week!'

'Knock it off,' von Dodenburg snapped, appalled by the sight of half a dozen bodies lying in the nearside ditch, charred black by the intense heat and shrunken to the size of small children. 'Those poor bastards over there were once your comrades.'

They drove on in an embarrassed silence towards the height, outlined menacingly against the pink-tinged battlefield sky. Schulze swallowed and licked his dry lips, trying in vain to fight off a sense of foreboding and apprehension. He knew that something was going to happen – that something was wrong. But he could not put his finger on it.

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Lieutenant Wertheim had planned the ambush on the narrow country road leading up to Crucifixion Hill very carefully. He had spread the bulk of his men along both sides of the road in the ditches to a depth of twenty yards. Once the Kraut colonel came driving up, forced to slow down by the hairpin bend site he had selected, one of his men would slip out of the trees and lay a daisy chain of Hawkins grenades to the rear. Even if the Kraut escaped the ambush and tried to back out, his vehicle would run into the grenades. His own guess was that if the Kraut became suspicious and tried to make a run for it, he would bug out to one side of the road, and as he told Fein, 'The boys will give the bastard what he deserves – a bellyfull of good old American lead.

All the same he knew he had to make sure that he had gotten the right man. The success of the Big Red One's push depended upon their killing the SS colonel. According to Porter, von Dodenburg's SS Battle Group was the only real fighting force in Aachen. Without him, the defence would fold up and Huebner's boys would be able to take the city with their eyes closed and one hand tied behind their backs.

'So what do we do, Fein?' he had asked the burly unshaven Top Kick after they had picked the site of their ambush. 'You and me have got to check the bastard out. We'll stop him with this,' he had indicated the red light and the rough-and-ready German traffic signal he had fashioned during the night in the deserted farmhouse. 'Once we know we've got the right guy, we shout to the men and hit the dirt fast! My guess is that the Kraut will try to break left or right and you know what will happen then?'

Fein had nodded sagely. 'Yeah, Lieutenant, it'll be curtains for the Kraut.'

'You ain't shitting, soldier.'

But Lieutenant David Wertheim did not know the men of Wotan.

Time passed leadenly. Twice there were false alarms. Once a column of ancient nags bearing supplies for the men on the height came plodding by, the steel-helmeted German drivers clearly silhouetted against the night sky. For Wertheim it was a strange feeling to be crouching so close to them, while they passed in weary file unaware that they were being watched by men whom they had once driven out of their country so cruelly that now their greatest desire was to kill as many of their comrades as possible. Half an hour later a motorcycle combination rattled past, the dispatch-rider's fat leather

pouch clearly outlined against his greatcoated belly. Thereafter silence.

At about eight, as the Big Red One's artillery fire started to intensify, he heard the faint but definite sound of a motor grinding up the slope in second gear. Wertheim dug Fein in the ribs urgently.

'It could be them,' he snapped. 'Warn the guys.'

Fein slipped his two fingers in his mouth and gave a shrill whistle. Concealed by the bushes, the waiting men crawled into their positions, weapons held at the ready. To the rear, the man with the daisy chain crouched behind a tree ready to slip out and cut the road off, once the unsuspecting enemy had passed. Wertheim clutched the traffic disc in his sweaty palm.

'Stand by with that signal light, Fein,' he hissed, his throat strangely constricted.

'Wilco, Lieutenant!'

The roar of the motor came closer and closer. Wertheim felt his heart thumping violently. He swallowed hard and told himself to calm down. For a moment it worked. Then his heart was thumping so loudly again that he thought Fein, crouched next to him, could not help but hear it. Suddenly a little VW jeep swept round the corner and he found himself illuminated in the blue glare of its headlights.

'The signal, Fein,' he yelled and in the same instant, holding up the traffic disc, added loudly, 'HALT!'

Matz hit the brakes. There was a rusty squeal and the VW jeep slowed down rapidly. Wertheim pressed the trigger of his grease gun. It fired three shots, then nothing! It had jammed.

'Fein,' he screamed, 'hit the bastards – quick!'

Fein dropped to one knee and levelled his carbine. Too late! Matz, bleeding from a shoulder wound, was reacting as the Wotan men always did, trained by the bloody partisan warfare in Russia where every secondary road behind the line was always liable to be ambushed. Cursing like a lunatic, he crashed home first gear, crouching low over the wheel. Next to him Schwarz let go a wild burst of Schmeisser fire. Behind him von Dodenburg and Schulze, carrying out the anti-partisan techniques automatically, fired into the trees on both sides. Then contrary to Wertheim's expectations, Matz drove his jeep straight forward. Wertheim flung his useless grease gun at the roaring jeep. It clattered against the side purposelessly. At the last moment, he sprang to one side. The burly Top Kick was not so quick. He screamed piteously as the corrugated pointed nose of the VW struck him squarely in the chest. Then

he fell under it and the one-and-a-half-ton weight rolled over his body, the left wheel crunching his bearded face to a pulp.

'You sadistic bastards,' Wertheim screamed, tears of rage streaming down his cheeks. He fumbled frantically for the grenade attached to his belt. From the right a bazooka fired, but the aim was too wild. The projectile struck file cobbles a couple of yards away from the jeep. A shower of fiery sparks. The bomb ricocheted upwards and caught the vehicle in the rear axle.

The Jeep skidded to one side as a tyre exploded. It slewed round in a crazy semi-circle, flinging the occupants of the Jeep on to the road in a crazy heap.

But the veterans of the Wotan reacted quicker than their ambushers in the ditch. They scrambled hurriedly to their feet, firing as they did so. A heavy-set man charged Schulze. He sidestepped and gave him a swift chop across the throat. Another ran at Matz, Tommy-gun clasped tightly to his hip. Matz, angry at being wounded for the fourth time and yelping with pain, lowered his hard head and butted him in the guts like an enraged billy goat. The man dropped, gasping hard. Matz bent, seized him by both ears and bashed his bare head against an upturned cobble.

'Over here – for Christ's sake, over here!' Wertheim yelled desperately, as the four SS men started to back up the hill firing in short, concentrated bursts. It was a foolish thing to shout.

'Get that bastard, Schulze,' von Dodenburg ordered above the rattle of their Schmeissers.

Schulze doubled forward, while the other three covered him, swinging their crouched bodies from left to right systematically, as they swept the trees with tracer, keeping their ambushers at bay.

Wertheim flung his stick grenade. It exploded harmlessly, a good dozen yards behind the big man doubling towards him. All it served to do was to illuminate his massive bear-like bulk momentarily in its blinding red-white light. Wertheim grabbed at his own boot. He had his trench-knife stuck down inside. But his trembling frantic fingers never found it. Two hundred pounds of trained muscle crashed into him. He went down with a stifled gasp as a heavy nailed boot smashed into his jaw. Red lights danced before his eyes.

Just before he lost consciousness, he felt himself being lifted unceremoniously and flung over the big man's shoulder. Then Lieutenant David Wertheim blacked out, knowing that Operation Black Guard had failed.

CHAPTER 12

'You filthy Hebrew swine – wake up, will you?' the metallic voice thundered. 'Come on, you heap of shit, open your eyes!'

The voice seemed to come from a long, long way away, but there was no mistaking its fervent hatred nor the fact that he was a prisoner in Kraut hands.

Slowly Wertheim shook his head. It felt twice its normal size. He wiped his hand across his face. He felt something warm and wet. He opened his eyes and stared down at his palm. It was smeared red with blood – his blood. He raised his head. A blurred picture of Adolf Hitler came into view. Then a face – a terrible, mutilated face, one half of which looked as if it had been chewed away by a wild animal. He closed his eyes again, wanting to blot it out.

'Schwarz,' rasped the voice which had awakened him, 'make him open his eyes.'

A small pause. Then a fist that seemed to be made of steel smashed into his unsuspecting face. Wertheim flew against the wall, his chair careening after him. A boot splintered his ribs. He cried out with pain. He let himself go limp to try to minimize the effect of the kicking. It seemed to go on for ever. He felt himself beginning to bleed inside.

'Thank you, Schwarz,' the voice said, 'that is sufficient.'

The man who was kicking him, his breath coming in thick pleasurable gasps, did not respond at once and the metallic voice had to repeat the order before the kicking finally stopped. Wertheim lay there weakly, allowing the warm blood to trickle down his side.

'All right, put him back in the chair, again, will you.'

Big hands seized him, as if he were an infant and placed him back in the chair. The horrible mutilated face came close to his. The stench of faeces was overpowering. He gagged. But the face did not move away. The one immobile glassy eye bored into his.

'Now,' the cold voice said without any emotion, 'I am going to ask you some questions and I want the answers to those questions – quickly.' To emphasise his point, the German grabbed Wertheim's cropped hair and pulled up his battered face to within inches of his own. 'Do you understand?'

'I'm an American officer – that's all I can say,' Wertheim gasped painfully, his tear-filled eyes screwed up with the pressure exerted on his scalp.

'You are a Yid, born in the East Mark – and you have absolutely no protection. We can do with you exactly what we want. Then you were dressed in German uniform when we captured you. Even the shitty Swiss Red Cross can do nothing about that.'

Wertheim said nothing. His mind was racing, trying to find a way out. But he knew his position was hopeless, no better than that of a spy.

The mutilated questioner seemed able to read his mind. 'You understand, don't you Jew? You are a non-person now. A dead man who is still walking around. All that is left to you is to decide the manner of your death.'

'What do you mean?' Wertheim croaked through blood-caked lips.

Donner relaxed his grip on the prisoner's dark crew cut. 'Whether you will die as a human being or whether you are tortured to death like a base animal, Jew.'

Wertheim understood all too well. But his hatred was greater than his fear. He thought of Rosie and how beautiful she had once looked before she had disappeared into the maws of the concentration camp with its mocking sign above the gate: WORK MAKES FREE. 'Of course I understand, what you mean, you cripple,' he yelled angrily. Then his burning rage and fear ran away with him, 'CRIPPLE.. CRIPPLE... CRIPPLE...' he shouted over and over again.

In the end Donner had had enough. Trying to control himself, feeling the faeces dribbling out of his ruined body as anger overwhelmed him, he thundered, 'Schwarz – Schulze, stop the Yiddish bastard, will you!'

Schulze rolled up his sleeves. 'All right, Lieutenant, this is where you start collecting your teeth in your cap!' He doubled his ham of a fist. But before he could bring it crashing into Wertheim's tortured face, Schwarz, his mouth contorted with rage, smashed his wooden fist down like a club on the nape of Wertheim's neck. The lieutenant screamed shrilly. Like two boxers working out in some dirty back room gym, beating a punch bag with routine precision, the two SS men began to beat up the American officer, the silence broken only by their heavy breathing and the thud of their fists on his flesh.

It seemed to go on for ever, but finally a distant voice said, 'All right, he's had enough for the time being.'

The two SS men stepped back, panting. The one who spoke with a Hamburg accent spat on his knuckles as if they hurt. The other one – the officer – stood there motionless, his crazy black eyes full of hate.

The horrible face loomed up through the haze again. Once more the stench of faeces was overpowering. 'Listen Jew,' the metallic voice rasped. 'I am a professional police officer. I have been all my life. For thirty years I have been used to asking people like you questions and getting the answers to those questions. In the old days in Weimar we had to work more slowly. Now, our methods are a little more streamlined.' He doubled his fist to indicate what he meant. 'But in both cases, I always got my answers – even from much tougher people than you, Jew. Do you understand?'

Wertheim said nothing. His mouth was still full of blood from the gaps where his teeth had once been. Donner paused for a moment, considering how he should phrase the all-important questions. Behind him at the window, Colonel von Dodenburg frowned. He knew how vital it was to elicit information from the skinny Jewish officer, but he didn't like methods of this kind. 'For God's sake answer and let's get it over with, Jew,' he told himself, angry at the Jew's stubbornness.

'Now, this is what I want to know,' Donner continued. 'Firstly when and where is your First Division going to attack. Secondly, who was your informant about Colonel von Dodenburg within the city?' He thrust his face close to Wertheim's, puffed up now to the size of a balloon. 'Now then, Jew, what do you say?'

With the last of his strength, knowing already what the results of his action would be, Wertheim hawked and spat directly into that terrible face. Donner sprang back, pale with shock. With the spittle dripping down his cheek, he cried, 'Schwarz – Schwarz, hit the filthy bastard!'

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A flood of icy water hit him in the face. Wertheim came to, spluttering with shock. He blinked rapidly several times. But the mist would not clear and for some reason that he could not establish, his eyes would not open properly. His vision was limited to a blurred slit. Then a pair of highly polished boots stepped into his line of vision. They halted. One of them thudded into his side as he lay in the puddle of water. He gasped with pain.

'You're awake, Jew, are you?' the metallic voice said. 'Good, well

you've had your little sleep. Now we're going to get the answer to our questions without wasting any more time. Schulze, fill it up.'

'Must we?' a worried voice asked a long way away.

'There is no time to be squeamish, von Dodenburg,' the metallic voice answered. 'The fate of Aachen depends upon this. If you don't like it, you can go away till it's all over.'

'No, I'll stay.'

There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of rushing water. Wertheim tried to raise his head to ascertain what it was. But he simply did not have the strength.

Finally the rushing sound stopped. 'It's full now, sir,' snapped the Hamburg voice of one of his torturers.

'Thank you, Schulze. All right, you can begin.'

The man with the Hamburg voice must have hesitated, for the command was repeated, 'All right, Schulze, I said you can begin, man! Don't you understand German?'

'Yes, sir. Sorry sir.'

The next instant, a big hand seized Wertheim by the scruff of the neck. His head was forced down. Through the puffed slits that were his eyes, he stared down at a sheet of water. With sudden terror, he realised what they were going to do to him and he kicked out desperately. The man holding him had been expecting the move. He dodged the blow easily. The next moment his head was forced into the bath. His mouth opened. Water poured in. Frantically he tried to breathe. The water filled his lungs. He squirmed and struggled like a madman. But he could not escape that vice-like grip. A roaring blackness swamped him. Just when he felt he must drown, the pressure decreased and he was allowed to flop face-downwards on the tiled floor retching agonisingly and vomiting blood and water, his heart beating like a trip-hammer.

'Do you want to answer my questions now, Jew?' The boot thudded into his broken ribs once again. But now he no longer felt the pain, just an overwhelming sense of relief at being able to breathe again.

'It's no use, General,' the Prussian voice said, its horror apparent even to the man lying in the pool of bloody vomit on the floor. 'He won't crack and time's running out. Leave him.'

'He'll crack, von Dodenburg, don't worry. They always crack in the end. Schulze, once more please – this time a little longer.'

This time someone grabbed his feet and he was flung bodily into the bath. The side of his head struck the bottom. Blood-red stars exploded before his eyes. The bubbles of air shot from his mouth, and his lungs started to fill with water. He writhed crazily and fought to escape that terrible hold. He evacuated his bowels with fear. He knew he was drowning. It was a matter of seconds now. A red roar filled his ears. In a second he would be dead.

They pulled him out just in time, vomiting pink-tinged water and screaming between his frantic hungry gasps for air, 'I'll talk... I'll talk... please let me talk.'

And leaning cynically against the wall of the bathroom, staring down at the helpless pathetic wretch of a prisoner, Donner laughed.

'The First kicks off its attack at zero five hours tomorrow morning,' Wertheim whispered in a husky voice, his eyes fixed on the floor.

'Where?' Donner rasped.

Wertheim did not answer immediately. Von Dodenburg leaned forward anxiously.

'Where?' the SS General persisted.

Wertheim swallowed hard. 'Verlautenheide,' he whispered, so low that his silent listeners had to strain to understand. 'It's near –'

'Yes, we know,' Donner snapped irritably, 'we know. But what is the First's objective?'

The Jewish officer, his sorely beaten face already beginning to turn a hideous green and black, licked his bloody lips as if he were reluctant to answer. Donner thrust forward his hideous mutilated face aggressively, an unspoken threat in his one eye.

Wertheim whispered. 'Crucifixion Hill.'

'Where?' von Dodenburg broke in.

'Height 239 – where you took me prisoner.'

Von Dodenburg looked at Donner triumphantly. 'Of course,' he cried, 'the height. It dominates the whole area. If they link up there, with the other Ami division coming up from Rimburg, they've got us cut off from our supplies. Then they can reduce the city at their leisure.' He turned to Schwarz, who seemed unable to take his eyes off the broken prisoner's face, 'Major Schwarz, alert the panzer grenadiers. They can beef up the men on the height. We'll keep the tank companies in reserve lest the Amis throw a feint at the city itself.'

Schwarz shook himself out of his reverie. 'Yessir,' he snapped, clicking

his heels together like the excellent soldier he was.

'Schulze, can Matz drive?' von Dodenburg swung round on the big NCO. 'Or is that shoulder of his too bad?'

'The only thing that'll stop Matz, sir,' Schulze said, relieved now that the nasty business of torture was over, 'is a big burst of HE in his eggs!'

Von Dodenburg had no time for humour. 'Good. Bring up the command tank. We're going out to the height with the panzer grenadiers. And check that the smoke launcher is armed. I don't want to be caught up there by Ami infantry with no smoke grenades, in case we've got to take off smartly. You saw what that Ami bazooka did to the Jeep.'

'You don't need to draw me a picture, sir,' Schulze said, taking a last look at the man whose face he had helped beat to a pulp. 'Mrs Schulze's boy is awfully anxious to come out of this war with his skin intact.' He saluted and disappeared through the open door, followed by Schwarz a moment later.

Von Dodenburg bit his lip thoughtfully, while from below the first sounds of the emergency move – whistles, commands, angry shouts – started to float up. 'General, I'll need more muscle in case that feint develops into something serious. Can you release one of your stomach battalions for transfer to the Big Red One front?'

Donner shook his head. 'No, von Dodenburg. You'll have to make do with what you've got.'

'Can I go and clean myself up?' Wertheim interrupted.

The two SS officers turned. They'd forgotten about their prisoner. His head was hanging low so that they could not see the sudden determination in his pain-filled, bloodshot eyes. Wertheim weakly indicated his soiled pants.

Donner shook his head. 'We have no time for that now, Jew,' he said firmly. 'Besides, what the devil does it matter what you look like? You will die within the hour as soon as we have finished our work here.'

Von Dodenburg looked at the pathetic wreck of a man, swaying slightly as he stood there before them, the water dripping from his torn uniform. He decided to contradict the General. 'There is a latrine at the end of the corridor.' He slapped a hand against his revolver holster. 'You can go in there and clean up, but don't try anything foolish.'

'Thank you,' Wertheim croaked, still not raising his face, afraid that the look in his eyes would give him away.

He started to stagger down the corridor, trailing water after him. The two SS officers watched him, amazed that he could still walk after his terrible

punishment. Von Dodenburg was the first to realise what the Jew was going to do.

'HALT!' he roared.

Wertheim broke into a shambling run. The window he had spotted from the room where the bastards had tortured him was only ten yards away now.

'Halt – or I fire!' von Dodenburg yelled, fumbling with the flap of his holster.

Wertheim drew on his last reserves of energy. Sucking in a deep breath and feeling the pain sear through his broken ribs into his torn lung, he *ran* towards the window just as von Dodenburg fired.

The slug slammed into the wall of the corridor a yard from his head. Plaster and brick showered his face. He shook his head angrily and, a split second later, dived forward. He hit the window head first, shattering the glass. The high-pitched scream of agony was ripped from his mouth by the wind as he hurtled to the ground. He struck the cobble yard four storeys below at nearly 6o mph. The fall broke every bone in his body, which bounced high into the air like a rubber ball, before flopping down once more. He twitched convulsively in his death throes, then lay still, arms flung out dramatically, staring unseeing at the dark German sky, dead at last.

High above, the two black-clad officers stared in reluctant respect at the body illuminated in the thin icy-blue beam of the command Tiger's headlights. Blood seeped everywhere, outlining Wertheim in a star of red. Then, mercifully, Schulze turned off the headlights and all was silent save for the steady purr of the Royal Tiger's diesels.

BOOK III – THE BIG PUSH

'We're the SS, Schulze, hated and feared wherever we go and one day those people who hate and fear us will attempt to take their revenge for these last five years. What else can we do but fight on?'

Colonel von Dodenburg to Sergeant-Major Schulze, October 1944

CHAPTER 13

The great 155-mm shell tore the dawn stillness apart.

'Arseholes up – three cheers, America!' Schulze yelled next to Colonel von Dodenburg, and ducked.

The shell exploded with a hellish crash two hundred metres beyond Crucifixion Hill. Flame spurted high into the air, and the men crouched on top of the Royal Tiger were showered with dirt and pebbles.

'The symphony concert has begun,' von Dodenburg cried sardonically.

The 155-mm Ami 'Long Tom' spoke again. The observers underneath the towering cross sucked in their heads automatically. Another shell threw up a great plume of smoke and dirt a hundred metres ahead of them.

'They're ranging in, sir,' Matz, his shoulder heavily bandaged, yelled, as the full weight of the Ami barrage descended upon the panzer grenadiers dug in at the crest of the hill.

'Here comes number three.' Von Dodenburg's answer was drowned in the roar of fire. Their Royal Tiger shuddered violently, as if it were a child's tin toy and not sixty tons of Krupp steel.

Now the whole front beyond the Ami start-line near Verlautenheide was deluged in a wave of fire from Huebner's eleven artillery battalions, supported by 4.2-inch chemical mortar batteries, borrowed from Lightning Joe's corps artillery. The world became a screaming, red-roaring hell, as the earth beneath the panzer grenadiers rocked violently.

Above them the little L-5 spotter plane buzzed round in slow, mocking circles, directing the softening-up barrage on to the German positions. Once a shell-crazed soldier sprang up on to the top of his foxhole and, legs braced apart, wild meaningless phrases tumbling from his slack, foam-tinged lips, fired an enraged burst at the Ami plane. It missed by a good hundred metres and a red-hot piece of shrapnel tore his arm off.

The trenches of the inexperienced stomach battalion, dug in a thousand metres below in the direction of Verlautenheide, were full of soaked, scared men, or silent, bloodied messes of pulped flesh and crushed bone. And then everything was uncannily silent. It seemed even more sinister than the terrible barrage that had gone before. As the Ami infantry started to come out of their trenches to the attack, it began to rain.

'By the great whore of Buxtehude, 'Schulze cursed, 'now even the angels are pissing on us!'

The GIs of the Big Red One's 18th Regiment slithered up the muddy, sodden bank behind which they had been crouching, and lurched forward, helmeted heads bent against the bitter rain. Before them the Shermans had formed up into a ragged line. The infantry doubled forward with mud-heavy boots to take cover behind their earth-churning wake. For they knew what to expect.

As the daylight crept across the desolate countryside from the east, the Kraut mortars opened up. The pillars of smoke rose swiftly towards the black-bellied low rain clouds. A crippled Sherman heeled to a stop and started to burn fiercely. Its infantry tail doubled heavily to the cover of the next one. Another tank stopped a mortar bomb and exploded almost immediately. White and red tracer ammunition zig-zagged wildly into the dripping sky.

Still the GIs plodded on, apparently ignoring the din of war around them. It seemed to them as if it was nature they were fighting, not human beings: the cold rain that dripped from their helmets into their collars, the mud that clung in heavy, clotted masses to their rubber boots, the slippery ground over which they stumbled. Soaked, sick, stunned by the roar of the Shermans and the din of the mortars, they trudged on across the bitter fields.

Colonel Smith, the regimental commander, looked back at his men. They were plodding in slow thoughtful groups, rifles and grease-guns at their hips. The attack was going okay. Then without warning he heard the familiar high-pitched burr of a Spandau. The morning air was suddenly filled with the hiss of lead. Men were crashing heavily to the mud almost before Smith heard the rattle of the German machine-guns. Here and there the replacements dropped hesitantly to one knee. In a second and they would be lying there full length, their attack paralysed.

Smith jumped on to a slight rise in full view of his men and the enemy. He waved his swagger stick with the silver head, his only weapon. 'All right, boys,' he cried above the rattle of small arms. 'We can't stay here all day. Only the stiffs'll be doing that.' He smiled. 'All I'm asking you to do is move up to that next hedgerow over there. That ain't much to ask, is it?' He looked down at an eighteen-year-old replacement with glasses whose ashen lips were trembling violently. 'That ain't much to ask, is it son?' his face sad and un-soldierly.

'No, sir,' the boy gulped and got to his feet.

'That's the ticket!' Smith said enthusiastically. He turned, waved his silver-headed stick, and started to plod forward again.

The machine-guns chattered violently. Still they advanced, filled with the infantryman's unreasoning hope that it would be easy this one time, drawing steadily closer to the hedgerow in which the stomach battalion had dug themselves. Thin violet lights crackled along it. The bullets cut swathes in their ranks. The fire intensified until a concentrated hail of lead hit them from the right flank too. Each man suddenly found himself alone, engulfed in smoke and death, a lone gambler with fate.

Smith blew his whistle. 'At the double,' he yelled. 'Keep moving, boys!' Clumsy in his mud-heavy boots, he began to double towards the right flank.

His men followed, obscene curses flung from their wet lips, their eyes wild, white and staring. The MG nests on the flank opened up with all they had, but they stumbled on in the face of the fire. Man after man toppled over, faces upturned and contorted, hands clawing the air in agony. Within seconds the first line had vanished, and the ground in front of the MG nests was piled high with American dead.

Smith dropped into a shell-hole, gasping violently. All around him the survivors of the second line did the same, their hands trembling like leaves, their chests heaving, eyes blurred so that they could not even aim their weapons. He grabbed the walkie-talkie and called for mortar cover.

For what seemed an age, the survivors of the 18th Regiment clung to the hollow while wave after wave of machine-gun fire swept their ranks, washing them away like shipwrecked sailors clinging to the debris of a sinking ship. Then the fire of the massive 4.2-inch mortars descended on the German positions and the hail of lead ceased.

Smith did not waste his opportunity. He sprang to his feet, his once immaculate uniform smeared with mud from top to bottom. He wiped his mouth free and blew his whistle. 'All right, let's move it!' he yelled above the roar of the barrage.

The men crouching among the dead of the shell holes hesitated. 'I said – move it,' he snarled.

Still they did not move.

A buck sergeant poked his head up hesitantly. 'What's your name, Sergeant?' Smith yelled.

'Kowalski, sir.'

'All right, Kowalski, you're acting top kick of this outfit. Now get your guys moving – fast!'

Polack Kowalski, whose ambition had never extended beyond the rank of sergeant, jumped out of his hole. 'All right, youse guys,' he yelled in his heavily accented English, 'get ya asses out of dem holes! Come on!' He lent urgency to his command by grabbing the nearest soldier and dragging him physically out of his hole.

Led by Colonel Smith and the new Master Sergeant Polack Kowalski, the GIs stumbled forward. Now at last they saw the camouflaged German helmets crouched over the thin quivering barrels of their Spandaus. All their pent-up fury and bitterness at the war, the CO, Kowalski, the rain, transferred itself to the Krauts. Yelling wildly, all fear gone, they launched themselves forward at the enemy. Kowalski was shot through the head in the first minute and the soldier he had kicked out of his hole heedlessly stamped over his dead body, forcing it deeper into the gory mud. Then they were in and among the Krauts.

The enemy tried to surrender. They dropped their smoking weapons. Raising their hands high, they cried, 'No shoot... no shoot... comrade... comrade!' But the enraged GIs were not their comrades. Bayonets plunged in defenceless stomachs, magazines emptied into terrified faces, heavy, mud-encrusted boots crashed into crotches, sending their owners reeling back, mouths full of hot vomit. The survivors, screaming with terror, were kicked out of their holes and ordered to double to the rear towards the cages. Suddenly numb with fatigue, the men of the 18th Infantry Regiment – what was left of them – flopped down into the mud, eyes vacant, their trembling fingers the only indication of what they had just been through.

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'Hot damn,' General Collins cursed. 'We've broken through!' He punched the upper arm of the aide who had brought the good news happily. 'I knew old Clarence's Big Red One would do it! Casualties?'

The young aide with the Social Register accent nodded. 'Yes, sir. General Huebner reports that –'

Collins held up his hand imperiously to stop him. 'For God's sake, Jones, if they're bad, don't tell me.'

'They're bad, sir.'

'Okay, I don't want to know – not just now anyway.' He swung round at his waiting staff, heavy portly men who looked a good ten years older than their energetic chief. 'All right, gentlemen, what's the situation with Hobbs' Thirtieth?'

A grey-haired staff officer with the red, white and blue ribbon of the Distinguished Service Cross of the old war on his fat chest, licked his lips. 'Eighteen hundred casualties already and about three hundred missing –'

'Get on with it, Ben,' Lightning Joe interrupted impatiently. 'Give me the dirt.'

'Well, General, quite frankly, the steam's gone out of the 30th's attack. They took a bad beating at Rimburg yesterday. My guess is that Hobbs's is stalled for twenty-four hours at least.'

'The Air Corps?'

'No deal, sir. General Hobbs's doughs got plastered yesterday by the Ninth TAC. He's already screaming for an inquiry.'

'Sod it!' Lightning Joe cursed. 'He would.'

He ran his hand through his thick hair and wondered whether he should relieve Hobbs or not. He knew he'd have the support of the Army Commander, General Hodges, if he did. Only the day before, Hodges, an infantry man who, like himself, had served on the Western Front in France in 1918, had told him that Hobbs was always 'either bragging or goddam complaining'. Still who would he put in the 30th Division Commander's place? No, he would leave that problem till after Aachen had been captured.

'All right, gentlemen,' he snapped to his staff. 'We're gonna give the Big Red One all the muscle we've got spare. They'll carry the main weight of the attack, seeing that the 30th is apparently stalled for the time being.' Pausing for breath so that his staff could get out their notebooks, he began to issue his orders in a staccato bark. 'Two battalions of tank destroyers from the Corps reserve... fighter bombers from the Ninth TAC... siege artillery from 12th Army Group... extra beef from the 29th Infantry... replace them in the line with the 1104th Engineering Combat Group... Gentlemen,' he proclaimed sternly, his eyes flashing round their pudgy un-soldierly faces, 'I want that height – what did Clarence call it at the conference, Ben?'

'Crucifixion Hill, General.'

'Thank you. Okay, gentlemen, I want that goddam Crucifixion Hill within the next twenty-four hours, regardless of the cost, do you understand?' They nodded solemnly. 'Okay, gentlemen, let's pop to!' And with an airy

wave of his hand, he dismissed them to their wall maps with the acetate overlays and their red and black crayon markings. Stage two of the battle for Crucifixion Hill was under way.

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'Fasten down the hatch,' von Dodenburg ordered. 'Turret two o'clock. Range seven hundred. Ami Shermans.'

A sweating Schulze spun his dials rapidly. Graduated lines, blurred and hectic, spun past his right eye.

'Got it yet?' Von Dodenburg followed the progress of the line of enemy tanks anxiously through his own periscope. Their lone Tiger had to stop the Ami Shermans before they got within firing range of the first line of panzer grenadiers dug in half way up the hill. The grenadiers could take care of the Ami stubble hopper by themselves.

'On target,' Schulze rapped, as four black shapes crawled into the bright circle of glass.

There was a sudden hush as if a giant were drawing in a breath. A 75-mm AP shell, solid-white and slow, tumbled through the air awkwardly towards them. Schulze closed his eyes instinctively. The next instant it had struck the earth fifty metres behind them. The Tiger shook like a leaf in gale.

'Shit in my hat,' Matz breathed over the intercom, 'that nearly cut my toenails for me!'

Furiously Schulze set to work spinning the dials again. The range figures leapt before his eyes. 'Six hundred and fifty. Six hundred. Five hundred and fifty.'

'Holy straw sack, Schulze!' von Dodenburg cried. 'Aren't you on yet?'

'On, sir!' he gasped.

'Fire!'

Schulze jerked the lever. The blast hit him in the face like a fist. He opened his mouth automatically so that the pressure would not burst his eardrums. The gleaming, red-hot cartridge tumbled to the metal deck. Von Dodenburg pressed the fume-clearing apparatus button. The fans started to whirl. A sound of clicking and the great hanging 88 was ready again. Down below the Sherman had come to a sudden stop and was burning furiously. Tiny black figures were racing from it, angry machine-gun fire kicking up spurts of dust at their heels.

'Target one o'clock – range four hundred. FIRE!'

The turret swung round. Schulze spotted the target at once. An Ami self-propelled gun, heavy with its 105-mm cannon, the only gun the Amis had which could tackle a Tiger. Once they had knocked it out there was a good chance that the rest of the Shermans covering the infantry attack would break off the fight and make a run for it. He grabbed the firing lever and the long cannon leapt at his side. A metre-long spurt of violet flame shot from the muzzle brake. The shell struck the SP just above the boogies. Von Dodenburg could see the red-hot glow of its impact. The SP rocked wildly from side to side. A man was flung from his position on the side of the armoured vehicle. For a moment it seemed as if the steel giant would overturn. Then suddenly the target disintegrated completely and a whirling mass of metal hurtled skywards.

The remaining Shermans stopped in panic and attempted to retreat to the cover of the woods beyond. It was a fatal mistake, and Schulze did not waste the opportunity offered him by the inexperience of the Second Armoured Division's tankers. The 88-mm shell ripped swiftly and surely through the afternoon sky towards the nearest Sherman. It struck it squarely on the glacis plate. Von Dodenburg could see the glow of impact, but nothing happened.

'What the hell –' von Dodenburg began.

Suddenly a thin white spiral of smoke started to rise from the Sherman's turret. Dark figures flung themselves out of the escape hatches, retching and gasping for breath while the flames leapt up greedily in search of anything combustible.

'Oh, my aching cheeks,' Matz chortled, 'look at those banana suckers hoofing it!'

But Schulze saw that there were still two Shermans to be dealt with. Swiftly he swung the turret round, his big hand whirling the dials. The first tank loomed up into the shining circle of glass. He fired. A Sherman disappeared in a sheet of flame. He fired again, bringing the last Sherman to a halt, its left track flapping uselessly in front of it. Schulze sat back, his right eye ringed a deep purple from the lens, the sweat pouring down his brow, his breath coming in great gasps.

'Wow,' he breathed, 'that was shitty nip and tuck!'

'It'll get you another piece of tin, Schulze,' von Dodenburg said hoarsely, thrusting back his helmet from a brow beaded in a sweat of

apprehension.

'Shit on the tin, sir,' Schulze said thickly. 'I'd rather have an immediate transfer to the paymaster's branch!'

Crucifixion Hill quaked. Thousands of tons of steel thundered from the enormous artillery blast furnaces to the west and deluged the height. Dugouts collapsed and the panzer grenadiers fought desperately to free themselves, clawing at the smoking earth with bloody fingers. A one-and-a-half ton VW jeep soared high into the air and burst apart thirty metres high. A machine-gun section was caught running across open ground and torn apart as they ran. When the smoke disappeared, all that was left was one lone boot, containing the bloody stump of a leg. The whole place was a bloody inferno of flying metal. The remnants of the 18th Infantry sprang up from their hiding places in the valley below. Screaming hysterically, they surged forward, confident now that all opposition must be dead. Von Dodenburg's panzer grenadiers waited in their shell-holes and half-destroyed foxholes and let them come on. The veterans of Russia and Monte Cassino shammed dead as the first wave raced over them, so confident that they did not take the elementary precaution of bayoneting the supposed corpses beneath them. Through their half-closed eyes the veterans could see the mud-encrusted buckled Ami combat boots and hear their hectic breathing. They waited, knowing that the second wave would be at least a hundred metres behind. Then, when they were sure that the stragglers had run by, they sprang to their feet, shouting in wild triumph. Tracer slammed into the backs of the men in olive drab. They turned in horror, realising too late that they had been tricked.

Behind them the second wave came to a ragged halt. A few raised their weapons to fire into the SS men. Their officers yelled at them urgently, 'You'll hit your buddies!'

It was the opportunity that the panzer grenadiers had been waiting for. They raced forward, carrying sharp-edged entrenching tools, combat knives, bayonets, anything which would cut and slice. In an instant they were in among the trapped Ami stubble hoppers. Slipping in the mud, they hacked, slashed, clove their enemies, while above them on the height in front of the great wooden cross, their commander watched the slaughter. An Ami staggered across the churned-up battleground, his hands held to his shattered stomach, intestines escaping from the ragged hole there. A panzer grenadier screamed like a wild man, slicing the face off an American sergeant, soaked in the vivid stream of blood that shot from his tortured mouth. A youth with

the Red Cross armband on his sleeve knelt in the bloody mire, his arms limp at his side and allowed himself to be slaughtered like an animal by a great ox of an SS trooper armed with a razor-sharp entrenching tool.

It was a massacre, ended only by the flight of the handful of survivors and the crash of the Ami artillery recommencing its frustrated barrage. Again the western horizon erupted in flame. The first shell hit the twenty-metre-high wooden cross. It creaked like the mast of an old sailing ship in a gale. Von Dodenburg looked up anxiously. Jesus, suspended there in immobile wooden agony, trembled violently. But the cross still stood there.

'We'd better get on our hind legs, sir,' Schulze said, eyeing the cross trembling above them. They had left the hulking 60-ton tank to assault the Amis man-to-man. 'That old boy up there won't be lasting much longer in my opinion.'

'Go on, Sergeant-Major,' Matz cried mockingly above the roar of the tremendous barrage. 'Don't you know that Jesus loves you? He'll protect and guard you.'

'Shut up, you carpet-slipper soldier,' Schulze roared. 'Or I'll shove your shitty wooden leg up yer lace-covered arse!'

Another shell struck the great cross and they began to run for the shelter of the Royal Tiger. Behind them the cross reeled from side to side. Von Dodenburg stopped instinctively and swung round. A jagged crack was running across the base of the crucifix. Jesus's head, surmounted by its crown of wooden thorns, dropped off and fell into the churned mud.

'Sir,' Schulze yelled urgently.

Von Dodenburg did not move. The crack reached the other side of the cross. A chunk of worm-eaten wood fell from Jesus's tortured chest. The whole structure teetered, dust pouring from the crack. Another shell slammed into its base. Slowly the headless figure began to disintegrate as the cross itself swayed and fell to the ground.

'Great crap on the Christmas Tree, sir,' Schulze screamed and grabbed the mesmerised officer by the arm, 'come on! Or you'll be looking at the potatoes from below in another second!'

As von Dodenburg pelted to cover with Schulze, followed by the Ami fire, it seemed to him as if the destruction of the great cross symbolised the destruction of their hopes.

CHAPTER 14

As the battle for Crucifixion Hill raged back and forth, the shootings started in Aachen. In the second week of October, when it looked as if the bitter cold rain would never cease, Donner ordered a Gestapo detachment into the city from Cologne.

They descended upon the shattered city in their ankle-length green leather coats, mouths full of gold teeth, cheap ten-pfennig working-men's cigars stuck in their cold lips, and began their reign of terror.

'Defeatists, deserters, looters,' Donner had commanded, looking at the professional policemen's faces from which pity had long been absent, 'shoot the lot of them, without the slightest mercy.'

A fat granny who had 'organised' a bag of coal in one of the ruins; a pale-faced, skinny deserter from one of the stomach battalions; a child who had written, 'surrender now while there's still time' on a wall in an immature chalk scrawl; a priest who had dared to ask the Lord's forgiveness in a cellar sermon for 'man's inhumanity to man' – they were all rounded up, heard the old routine statement beginning, 'In the name of the Führer and the German Folk, this specially convened court sentences you', and were quickly dispatched by a burst of machine-gun fire at the back of the Quellenhof.

But that wasn't enough for Donner – 'that godless Devil Donner', as the frightened inhabitants of the cellars and ruins called him behind his back. He took to shooting prisoners himself, maintaining that it was criminal to waste more than 'one bullet on such defeatist rabble at a time of crisis like this'.

He wandered the city, followed by his sinister guard of Gestapo men, selecting his victims at random, maintaining that even if they were innocent, they would serve as a warning 'to the rest of these filthy Catholic traitors'. An army padre from one of the stomach battalions, with purple tabs and crosses on his collar instead of the usual Wehrmacht eagle and swastika. 'Come here, Pope! Why aren't you at the front with the rest of your battalion?'

The priest's face contorted with fear at the sight of Devil Donner and his leather-coated, squat henchmen with the machine-pistols cradled menacingly in their arms. 'But, General I have just brought a convoy of wounded from my battalion down here to the field hospital,' he pleaded. 'My commander specifically instructed me –'

'Shoot him!' Donner barked and, without another word, turned his back on the condemned padre.

An ugly girl was sitting in the rubble of her shelled house staring vacantly at nothing, her legs spread apart so that passers-by could see the soft white flesh of her thighs above the shabby black stockings.

Donner and his men found her. 'What are you sitting there for, woman?' he snapped coldly. 'Have you no work to do at this time of crisis?'

The girl stared at him blankly.

Donner sneered. 'A complete idiot. Result of too much inbreeding in this area. Bad blood – the lot of them. Shoot her!'

As 'Pistol Paul,' the fattest of the Gestapo men, named because of his twin pistols, began to drag her away into the ruins to carry out the order, she started to cry. But she did not cry like young women normally do; her cries were those of an animal going to the slaughter. A single shot rang out from behind the cover of a shattered chimney stack. Pistol Paul ran his hand swiftly up her dress as she crumpled to the ground, licked his lips with pleasure at what he found there, then ran back to join the murder squad.

And so the slaughter of the civilians went on all throughout that terrible week of October. Yet even Donner could see that, despite his reign of terror, the physical and moral defences of the city he had sworn to hold were beginning to crumble. Both civilians and soldiers within the ruined city moved slowly and seemed indifferent to commands, even when those commands signified their own execution. Their faces had become pinched. Their glazed eyes sunk deep behind protruding cheek-bones, many of them just stared apathetically into space, dragging their feet leadenly behind them in the streets.

As the Big Red One cut off road after road leading into the city from the nearest railhead at Jülich, food became scarcer. By October 12th the daily ration of the men in the line became one can of 'Old Man' and half a loaf of canned pumpernickel per two men. The rear echelon stallions managed with half that. The civilians weren't fed at all.

But despite Devil Donner's heartless shootings, a hectic secret life went on among the ruins of the smoking city. When von Dodenburg came down to Aachen to report to Donner, Matz and Schulze seized the chance to visit the latter's private whorehouse. Their stomachs empty, they were drunk within minutes on the shot SA man's supply of cheap Korn.

'Off with the rags!' Matz roared drunkenly, tearing off his own oil-

stained black uniform until all that was left was his helmet, pistol belt and boots. 'And get those pearly gates ready! I've limped all the way here!'

'So I can see,' the big blonde said with mock coyness. 'Oh, put it way before I faint!'

'Go on,' laughed Matz, unstrapping his wooden leg and pausing momentarily to slap her heartily across her broad buttocks. 'You've seen more of those than I've had hot dinners!'

'Hands off,' Schulze threatened, swaying drunkenly. 'That's my bride.'

'Your bride,' Matz sneered good-humouredly, still fiddling with the straps of his wooden leg, attached to the stump of his knee. 'That Gerti of yours has been bride to half the shitty Wehrmacht.'

Schulze hit him playfully. Matz shot backwards over the couch, his wooden leg trailing behind him. The girls screamed and scattered, naked breasts quivering.

Matz pulled his leg free. 'Here, Heidi,' he ordered the girl he usually slept with. 'Get your big arse over here.' Then, supporting himself on her shoulder, Matz raised his wooden leg menacingly. 'All right, you big bastard – sergeant-major or no sergeant-major, I'm going to knock your stupid big turnip off for you.'

Urging Heidi forward, he advanced upon Schulze.

Schulze's ugly face was set in a broad grin. He smiled benevolently at the angry Matz. He farted leisurely. 'Let's have a little bit of green smoke first, shall we... We had pea soup at the HQ, Gertrude,' he explained to the blonde. 'Now, now, Matz, you're going to rupture yourself lifting that leg. If I were you, I'd save my strength to lift that pathetic little thing you've got down there!'

Matz lunged wildly at Schulze with his wooden leg. Schulze ducked easily. One big hand shot out and punched Heidi in her scarred, naked belly. She collapsed like a deflated balloon. Matz careened over the sofa and landed in the lap of a screaming redhead. Schulze threw himself forward. Matz rolled to one side. The two drunken NCOs rolled back and forth across the cellar floor, aiming wild punches at each other and laughing like two schoolboys. Thus engaged and cheered on by the shouting, naked whores, they did not hear the thin chill wailing of the air-raid siren until it was almost too late.

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A kilometre away in another cellar, now shuddering violently under the impact of the bombs, Colonel von Dodenburg and the redhead stared at each other in silence, the flickering yellow candle throwing grotesque shadows across their pale young faces.

Von Dodenburg could see that she was reaching the end of her tether. Her green eyes shone hectically in her emaciated face. He had brought her two cans of Old Man but she had explained that she was 'too hungry to eat it', whatever that meant. Her hands trembled violently with every fresh explosion.

He leaned forward across the rough wooden table and clutched them tightly in his own. They were icy cold; they felt like the hands of someone already dead. 'Don't be scared,' he pleaded, trying to calm her. 'At the front we always say you never hear the one that kills you.'

'They're dying everywhere in the cellars now,' she said, her voice hardly audible. 'Old men, women, children – not soldiers. Just unarmed civilians. Dying everywhere.' Her voice trailed away and her green eyes filled with tears, as if she felt and bore the whole world's cares.

'We shall make them pay back our losses tenfold,' von Dodenburg snapped, iron in his voice.

Another 500-pound bomb dropped in the street overhead. The cellar swayed. The yellow flame of the candle guttered with the blast and almost went out.

'Pay them back?' she said listlessly. 'How can you pay for a life, Kuno?' her voice rose, 'they are dead. That's it.' She pulled her hand free from his grasp. 'Dead, finished, kaputt – nothing can bring them to life again! All that we must do now is save the lives of the few who are left before it is too late.' She stared at him, her beautiful green eyes hysterical. Like some front swine, von Dodenburg realised suddenly, she had seen too much and was preparing to escape into the blessed oblivion of voluntary madness.

He pulled her naked body close to his. She was lathered in sweat although the fat-bellied coal-stove in the corner was almost out. 'Don't talk,' he whispered urgently. 'Talk is for fools – now. All that counts is action – and love.'

Almost brutally, he thrust her back on the hard wooden table. Her legs spread automatically. He forced the glistening triangle open. She shuddered – whether with pleasure or distaste he no longer knew nor cared. The frantic,

panting, sweating act of love began, while all around them the world shuddered, trembled and died.

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The bombers had gone. Everywhere women's voices called in anguish for their missing children, who tottered aimlessly through the burning streets.

Schulze, who had rescued a bottle of Korn, raised it to his lips and took a mighty swig, not noticing that the fiery liquid was running down his unshaven chin. 'Where's Gerti?' he yelled.

Matz gave him his answer. He stumbled suddenly and would have fallen if he had not been supported by a weeping Heidi, still naked save for the one-legged NCO's issue pants, which reached to her plump knees.

'She's here, Sergeant-Major,' he yelled and tried in vain to stand to attention. 'May I respectfully report one casualty, Sergeant-Major? The whore Gertrude X, killed in the line of duty. Hero's death for Folk, Führer and Fatherland!'

Drunkenly Schulze staggered over to him and stared down at the naked body sprawled out grotesquely in the brick rubble, her face shaded in the blood-red hue of the flames. He took another swig of the Korn and passed the bottle automatically to Matz, who was still trying to maintain the position of attention. 'She was a good whore, Matz,' he said numbly, while the other whores, shoulders bent, hands held protectively across their flabby breasts, sobbed steadily. 'Yellow card or not, she put her heart into it, believe you me. I've had plenty of good workouts from that whore there! She knew her business.' He reached his big hand for the bottle, without taking his eyes off the dead woman. 'Korn,' he commanded. He drained the rest in silence with a mighty gulp. He coughed and wiped the back of his big dirty hand across his mouth, then slowly bent down and closed the whore's legs. 'Better that way,' he said.

Matz grabbed him firmly by the big muscular arm. 'Come on, Schulze,' he said, 'Let's get back to HQ.'

Without a word, the two naked men, the one limping badly, slowly began to make their way through the burning streets, where the dust-white, frantic civilian police were beginning to lay the dead out in long lines ready for the flame-throwers. Already the big black rats and the half-wild city mongrels were gnawing the ones in the shadows, stealing off with chunks of

dripping human flesh. They had almost reached the Quellenhof when the ruddy glare of the flames illuminated the faded white scrawl on a half-shattered wall. Schulze read it aloud in a dazed drunken voice, swaying from side to side as he did so, 'Give me five years and you will not recognise Germany again! Adolf Hitler.'

With all his strength he hurled the empty Korn bottle at the fading notice. The bottle shattered loudly against the bricks. 'That you can say again, Adolf,' he groaned, 'that's for shitting sure!'

The two men staggered on.

CHAPTER 15

On October 13th while Wotan's panzer grenadiers, aided by von Dodenburg's remaining fifteen Tigers, held the Big Red One half way down the embattled hillside, dominated now by the broken stump of the great cross, Hobbs's men finally managed to break through the Rimburg Line. The US Army was headed south towards Aachen.

The First Army Commander, Courtney Hodges, had personally been to see the situation on the 30th Division's front. Afterwards he had told a troubled and apologetic Hobbs, 'All right, Leland, the chips are down. You either produce or you go. I hate to go over a corps commander's head to do this, but I want this goddam Aachen gap closed! After all, Ike's on my tail too with a big stick. He wants me to get my butt out of this Aachen mud and be on my way to the Rhine.' He had smiled thinly, but Hobbs had not been fooled. The writing was on the wall for him. He threw his last remaining strength into the battle, supervising the night attack personally; and it worked. By dawn the German positions around the onion-towered baroque Rimburg Castle were broken; by mid-morning the Krauts were streaming back south towards Aachen in panic-stricken confusion.

Pandemonium reigned at Donner's HQ at the hotel. A young staff officer, his immaculate uniform now splattered with mud, 'monkey swing' hanging loosely across his breast, blood streaming down the left side of his face, reported in a choking voice, 'Most of the lead companies have been wiped out, sir... positions razed to the ground.'

'Artillery?' a frantic Donner yelled.

'Lost contact, sir,' a fat, sweating staff major crouched over the main command radio, yelled back. 'Everything's destroyed. The lines are down everywhere.'

'Heaven, arse and twine,' Donner cried angrily. 'How the devil can I defend a city when I've got nothing to defend it with? What do those rear-echelon stallions think they are playing at?' For one awful moment he remembered that terrible breakthrough of the Allies in France in September 1918 on that Black Sunday which had heralded the end of everything he had known and respected as a young officer in the old Imperial Army. Then he pulled himself together, aware of the young aide's shocked face and the fat

staff major's gaping mouth. It wouldn't do to allow his staff see him go to pieces; they must have confidence in the leadership even if the world was damn well falling apart all around him.

Before he could act, however, the field telephone shrilled. He beat the aide to the instrument. 'Donner,' he barked.

Even his voice could not calm the hysterical officer at the other end. 'Large tank formations bearing down upon us from the east,' the officer cried, forgetting all wireless procedure. 'We've got no anti-tank guns left. No bazookas. All our mines have been used.' The officer sobbed hysterically. 'Sir, you've got to send reinforcements!'

'Pull yourself together, man,' Donner snapped, sickened. 'Hold on – I make you personally responsible for the position. It's your head!'

'But, sir.'

Donner slammed down the phone. His spirit was restored. Full of energy, he started rapping out orders.

'Major, don't just sit there! Get your base stallions moving. I want reinforcements – I demand reinforcements! Turf anyone who can hold a rifle out of the dressing stations! Throw in the police – they're all trained to use weapons. Get the cooks – the clerks. Go through the hospitals. This is not the time to allow the malingerers to lie there farting between clean sheets while better men die. Well, come on, get moving!

'You,' he turned to the bleeding aide. 'Get on that damned motorcycle of yours and press on the tube. I want you to get through to Colonel von Dodenburg. At all costs, do you hear? I need Big Friends,' he used the SS code for tanks. 'And I need them quick!'

The aide ran out, trampling over the useless maps with his dirty boots. The time for strategy was over. The naked struggle for the existence of Aachen had begun.

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The retreat from the Rimburg Line was a shambles, governed by panic, powered by naked fear. While the whole horizon burned brick-red with the barrage from Hobbs's massed batteries and the very earth rocked with their insane hammering detonations, the survivors struggled back; an endless stream of Horch staff cars, eight-ton Opel trucks, looted tractors pulling farm-wagons piled high with groaning wounded, ambulances covered fearfully by

Red Cross flags in the pathetic hope that the Jabos of the Ninth US TAC would respect them. And in the midst of the forlorn, frightened grey-coated stream, the two Tigers stood like steel fortresses, their long guns pointing menacingly the way the Amis must come.

Von Dodenburg had positioned well the only two tanks he could spare from the vital height of Hill 239. The half-track load of panzer grenadiers he had brought with him to cover the Tigers against Ami bazooka attacks had blasted the great oaks that had bordered the cobbled road for a distance of five hundred metres. Now the tree trunks blocked it like huge fallen matchsticks, forcing both the retreating German infantry and their American pursuers into the fields on both side. Krause had taken up his position on one side of the road and his tank on other, both covered by their thin skin of infantry. Forced into the fields, the Shermans would lose the advantage of their superior speed and greater manoeuvrability, and be easy meat for the Tigers' 88s.

Thus while the survivors streamed shame-faced into the city where Donner's head-hunters were already waiting to reform them into new companies, at pistol-point if necessary, the two lone Tigers prepared for the uneven battle. Above them the huge crimson sun hung in an iron-grey sky heavy with menace.

'Do you know, Matz,' Schulze said as they draped the Royal Tiger with camouflaged netting and oak branches, 'that there are over two hundred million Ivan?'

'Someone ought to invent the contraceptive in Russia then,' Matz growled, aiming a fruitless kick at a soaked and hatless straggler who almost bumped into him.

'And there's nearly the same number of shitty Amis, not to mention the Tommies and all that cannon-fodder they've got from India and Africa.'

'Well, all I can say, Sergeant-Major, is that I've been doing my best these last goddam five years to plant as many of them as I could in the soil.' He sniffed. 'But still I didn't realise that there were so many of 'em.'

Schulze nodded his head significantly. 'No, and a lot more people don't either. Five hundred million of the shits and all we've got on our side is a few greasy spaghetti-eaters and a lot of operatic tenors from Hungary and Romania who cream their knickers as soon as they hear a popgun go off.'

Matz finished his side of the big vehicle. Across on the other side of the road, Krause's crew was also finished. 'We've still got the V-weapons,

Sergeant-Major. You can't overlook the Führer's V rockets, you know.'

Schulze made an obscene gesture with his middle finger. 'You know what you can do with the Führer's V-weapons, don't you, Matz.'

'But the rockets, they're giving the Tommy civvies a hard time in London, according to the papers.'

'You'll be telling me next you believe in Father Christmas and Grimm's Fairy Tales,' Schulze sneered, dropping the last of the netting on the gun into place.

'And if you'll forgive my German, Sergeant-Major, you're talking out of the back of your arse. We've got V-weapons that'll win the war yet for Germany. When I was in hospital in Heidelberg after Cassino getting this movable saucer fitted,' he tapped his wooden leg, 'I heard them talking about a new poison gas that would –'

'Poison gas!' Schulze interrupted scornfully. The only poison gas you'll see in this war is when those kitchen bulls serve shitty pea soup and those big farmboys of the heavy weapon company start farting. No, Matz, we've got half the fucking world against us.' He paused for breath. 'How come we're holding this road with only two Tigers. Explain that, will you, you sodding field marshal!'

'I can explain, sodding Field Marshal Schulze,' von Dodenburg's Prussian voice said behind them.

The two NCOs sprang to attention, but he waved to them to desist. 'Don't try to bullshit me,' he said with a faint smile. 'I know you like the back of my hand. The two of you have no respect for an officer and a gentleman.'

'Well, they do say that human beings begin with the rank of lieutenant, sir,' Schulze said pleasantly, standing at ease.

'You see what I mean,' von Dodenburg said. And then his handsome young face hardened and the smile vanished. 'You asked, Schulze, why we're out here trying to defend that damned road there with only two tanks against what is virtually a whole Ami division? I'll tell you why. Because we wear this cursed black uniform and these damned stupid silver badges.' Angrily he tapped the gleaming SS runes on his collar. 'Because our cap badge is a death's head that makes half Europe tremble with fear. We're the SS, Schulze, hated and feared wherever we go and one day those people who hate and fear us will attempt to take their revenge for these last five years. What else can we do but fight on? Each day we stall the Allied advance is another day of life for people like us, whether we achieve it with poison gas or with this

beautiful monster here.' He slapped his gloved hand against the Tiger's metal side, his eyes glowing with a warm fanaticism. 'Because the day we stop fighting we'll be looking at the potatoes from beneath within the hour. Understand?' His blue eyes searched the big Hamburger's face.

Schulze nodded. 'Yessir,' he gulped.

'Good, I'm going over to check out Krause's camouflage. You carry on here.'

Matz waited till the lean colonel had crossed the road to Officer-Cadet Krause's Tiger, then he tapped his dirty finger significantly against his temple. 'Schulze,' he said slowly, 'I think the Old Man's going off.'

The big Hamburger did not reply, but his brown eyes set in their deep exhausted rings followed von Dodenburg anxiously.

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'Loaded – safety catch released,' snapped Schulze, as the little red light began to glow.

Below, the big Maybach engines burst into life. 'Engines started – ready to go,' Matz reported over the intercom.

'Thank you,' von Dodenburg said, as cool and collected as ever now, searching the desolate horizon for the first sign of the Amis.

Schulze sighed and looked at the long line of shells lying in the bin. All sparkling new innocence. Soon they would become the harbingers of destruction, making men quake, scream in torment and terror, and finally die.

'Here they come,' von Dodenburg reported, lowering his glasses for a moment to wipe the lenses clean with a dirty handkerchief.

Schulze thrust his right eye against the sight and adjusted it quickly. A line of slow black beetles had breasted the height, prevented from using the road because of the fallen oaks.

'Watch that armoured car,' von Dodenburg barked. 'At two o'clock.'

Schulze spun the 14-ton turret round as effortlessly as if it had weighed 14 grammes. A six-wheel Ami Staghound was racing past the tanks, bouncing up and down across the bumpy fields. 'Recce, sir,' he said.

'Yes, give it six hundred metres and then we'll inform them that we are here. Just before they die, they'll learn they have carried out their mission successfully, eh?'

Nine hundred metres... eight hundred... seven hundred... The Staghound

started to slow down, as if its commander sensed trouble was awaiting him somewhere ahead. Behind him the line of Shermans rumbled closer. The Staghound commander knew he had to go on. Schulze could almost sense the Ami's fear. He guessed he'd be sitting there in his dark, oil-stinking turret, the sweat pouring down under his leather helmet, eye glued to the periscope, one hand held ready on the trigger of the smoke-discharger, which would cover his flight once the trouble started. Carefully, Schulze adjusted his sight so that the first shell would hit the left side of the armoured car's turret where the three smoke-dischargers were located. He told himself it was a shitty thing to do – it meant the Staghound would be a sitting duck – but, as the CO had said, it might also mean one more day of precious life to them.

'Krause,' von Dodenburg snapped over the radio. 'We shall open up in a moment. Enemy armoured car to our front – two o'clock. See it?'

'All over it, sir.'

'As soon as we start firing, hit the Ami flank up there. We'll do the same to the right. Then we will move forward together. Through that stream and right into them.'

In spite of being a veteran, Krause could not conceal his excitement. 'Christ, sir, this is going to be like Panzer Meyer at Caen when he tackled a whole British tank brigade with one Tiger!'

Von Dodenburg sniffed. 'Well, he's a general and generals get away with such things. Let's hope we're as lucky.' He pulled down the hatch and dropped into the leather seat next to Schulze. The lid slammed shut with the hollow ring of finality. 'All right, Schulze, fire at will!'

Schulze squeezed the firing bar carefully. The great gun reared at his shoulder. The Tiger shuddered as the flame blazed from the 88's muzzle.

'Right on, Schulze!' Matz yelled excitedly, as the Tiger moved forward, 'got him right up the arse!' Five hundred metres away the Ami Staghound smashed to a halt as if it had run into an invisible brick wall. Sparks were showering along the length of its motor cowling. As it burst into flame, an Ami hurled himself out, his uniform ablaze. Twice he rolled over in the mud, arms threshing wildly. Then he was still.

'Exit the reconnaissance element,' von Dodenburg said. 'The first act is over. The second can begin.'

The first Sherman got off its shell quicker than Schulze. Its 75-mm belched orange flame. A shell ricocheted off the Tiger's thick front armour. The turret was suddenly full of a burnt-cinder stench. Schulze ducked

instinctively and cursed with surprise.

'What's up, Sergeant-Major?' Matz's voice came over the intercom mockingly. 'A bit of wind gone up yer drawers?'

'A bit of knuckle sandwich'll be finding its way into your big gob, if you risk another fat lip like that,' Schulze growled, fiddling frantically with his dials.

'Knock it off,' von Dodenburg broke in. 'Perhaps you gentlemen may recall we're fighting a war?'

The next moment Schulze's gun spoke again. 'Hit!' von Dodenburg roared. A hundred metres away, Krause, keeping pace with the command tank, scored a hit too, bringing a Sherman to a stop, oily black smoke pouring from its shattered turret. The crew tried to escape. But the panzer grenadiers dug in at the side of the road showed no mercy. They mowed them down before they had run five metres. They fell like puppets, suddenly gone crazy, arms and legs flailing in their death agonies. A Sherman burst from the bushes to von Dodenburg's right. Another came down from the barred road.

'They're coming from the flanks, Schulze,' Matz screamed.

A 75-mm shell slammed into the Royal Tiger's side. From within they could see the metal glow a dull red for a moment, then the AP whined off with a deafening howl. Schulze fired. From somewhere an Ami machine-gun opened up. Slugs sprayed the hull. One penetrated a gun slit. The eighteen-year-old 'booty German' second-driver reeled back, clutching his face, the blood streaming from between his tightly clenched fingers. 'I can't see,' he screamed in his thick, accented German. 'I can't see... I'm blinded!'

With surprising gentleness Matz pushed him to one side and continued driving. 'It's all right, sir,' he gasped into the intercom. 'Everything's under control... everything's in butter.' As the great tank rattled towards the Shermans, the young driver began to die on the shaking blood-soaked seat.

Another AP shell slammed against the Tiger's thick armour. The sixty-ton monster rocked violently, but the big Maybach engines kept running. Schulze fired once – twice in rapid succession. The Sherman on the left flank, stricken, its driver dead at the controls, his head shorn off, barrelled at 30 mph into the road embankment where it exploded a second later. A group of Ami infantry appeared from nowhere.

'MG?' von Dodenburg bellowed.

But the infantry did not want to fight. They raised their hands in surrender. Matz pushed aside the dying boy who kept sliding against his

shoulder, and put his foot hard down on the gas pedal. The Amis began to scatter. The tank cut into them, remorselessly churning up their defenceless bodies under its broad metal tracks.

Ahead the line of Shermans had come to an uncertain halt beyond the stream. Von Dodenburg knew they would turn and flee if he pressed home his attack; the Ami tankers always did when they were faced by the superior Tiger.

'Advance – full speed!' he commanded excitedly, eyes sparkling with the bloodlust of the chase.

Matz crashed his way through the Tiger's thirty-odd gears. It gathered speed, engines roaring deafeningly. Krause drew parallel. The stream loomed up. Von Dodenburg sized it up swiftly. It didn't look too deep for the Tigers.

'Prepare to ford, Matz,' he ordered. 'Check watertight seals. Raise the stand-pipe.'

Matz slowed down and guarded the six-metre-long gun carefully over the deep bank. Ahead the Shermans still hesitated. With a thick grunt, it went over. Krause's Tiger followed suit. Its nose splashed into the water. It went under. The water came up to its deck. Deeper. Now only the standpipe showed above the surface. Von Dodenburg gulped. He always hated this moment. Was the Tiger really watertight? Would the Maybachs keep functioning? Would an enemy shell catch them just when they were at their most vulnerable?

Then Matz's voice reported with complete calm: 'Everything all right, sir. Vision correct.'

Then the Maybach engine took the extra strain and they were waddling up the steep bank, shaking water everywhere like some amphibious monster ascending from the deep. Von Dodenburg flung back the hatch. Ahead the Shermans were obviously preparing to flee, unnerved by the appearance of the Tiger on their side of the stream. He looked behind him.

'Krause!' he gasped.

'What is it, sir?' Schulze cried.

'He's stuck half way across. I can just see the top of his standpipe. His engine must have flooded.'

'What are we going to do, sir? Officer-Cadet Krause's a good soldier – and he's only seventeen.'

Von Dodenburg hesitated only for a moment. He could imagine Krause's crew fighting off the water in their armoured coffin, screaming and

struggling as the water rose higher in the green gloom. But he couldn't stop now. The whole front depended upon his breaking the Ami armoured thrust. 'Move out,' he rasped. 'There's nothing we can do for them now.'

Matz pushed the dead driver to one side and slammed home the start gear. The Tiger began to roll again.

By late afternoon, the lone Royal Tiger had broken the Ami attack. The Second Division's armour, covering Hobbs's 'Butchers', was streaming back the way it had come, followed by the panic-stricken doughboys.

Von Dodenburg, standing high in the turret of the Tiger, the metal gleaming brightly at a dozen points where it had been struck by Ami 75s, could hardly believe the success of his lone attacks. As they rolled deeper into enemy territory, he knew he should turn back, before Ami air spotted them. But something drove him on despite the risk. 'Big trap, with nothing behind it,' he recalled the phrase they had used to describe the typical Berlin big-mouth during his schooldays in the Reich capital. Now he, too, was a 'big mouth with nothing behind it': one lone Tiger pitted against an Ami division. Still, their boldness was paying off and every hour he gained for Donner would give the Police General a better chance of getting some sort of provisional front together behind him.

'Ami dump, sir – four o'clock,' Matz's voice came through the headphones, routine and emotionless. He swung round and saw a couple of hastily erected bell-tents, with naked men pouring out of them, towels clutched absurdly to their genitals.

'Ooh, sweetie, look at all those lovely bottoms,' Schulze simpered. 'Worth a fortune if you were a warm brother.'

Von Dodenburg pressed the trigger of the turret MG. Tracer sprayed the muddy grass outside the shower tent. The Amis threw down their towels and galloped across the fields towards the wood in the distance. Von Dodenburg took his finger off the trigger.

'Let them go,' he said, laughing. 'Seems wrong somehow to shoot a man without his clothes on.'

'I can see you'll end up in the Salvation Army after all, sir,' Schulze said. 'There's a heart of gold underneath that rough exterior, sir.'

'And you'll feel my rough boot up your golden arse if you're not careful,' von Dodenburg said. 'All right, Matz, stop her. Let's see what we can inherit from our rich Ami friends.'

They 'inherited' a great deal. While Matz dragged out the dead driver

and dumped him in a nearby ditch, Schulze looted the shower unit's kitchen, retrieving a steaming saucepan full of meatballs, corned beef, dried ham and eggs, sardines, tomatoes – the booty of a great pile of cans.

'Sir, would you like to indulge?' He pulled another hand from behind his back to reveal a bottle. 'Firewater – Ami firewater!'

While the dead driver lay in the ditch ten metres away, staring sightlessly into the darkening sky, they tore into the lukewarm food ravenously, washing it down with great swigs from the litre bottle of looted bourbon.

'Like shitting God in France,' Matz chortled, spearing a meatball with his combat knife. 'That's the way these Amis live! Why oh why wasn't I born an Ami – with such lovely fodder!' He touched his oil-stained dirty fingers to his greasy lips, and thrust the meatball into his mouth.

'Yeah, why? Why should the Reich suffer a bastard like you?' Schulze dipped his canteen cup into the revolting mixture. 'Let the Amis have you! Shitting foot and mouth disease you've got, Matz. You eat too much and wear out too many boots.'

'I've only got one fecking leg, Sergeant-Major,' Matz protested. 'And, by the way, how come you're using a shitty canteen cup instead of a spoon like the rest of us?'

'Because I'm a sergeant-major,' Schulze said majestically, dipping his cup into the mixture once again, 'and you're just a lowly sergeant. It's as simple as that, Matz.'

Von Dodenburg, feeling the fiery Ami spirit in his belly, laughed, as he listened to the two veterans' banter. For a moment he was confident, but the time out of war was soon at an end.

'What's that racket?' Matz asked suddenly.

Von Dodenburg dropped his spoon. A black speck was roaring in at them at tree-top level. 'Get back to the tank!'

They dropped their canteen cups with a clatter. The black speck became a Mustang fighter-bomber barrelling in at 400 mph, its engine cowling painted like the snout of a shark. As they pelted for the Tiger, its engine howled, a monstrous black shadow preceding it across the desolate countryside. Violent purple lights crackled along the Ami plane's wings.

'Rockets!' von Dodenburg yelled, 'Down!'

As they flung themselves into the mud, crimson flame stabbed the sky. The rockets flew at them, trailing a tail of fiery sparks. Explosions

mushroomed all around. As the Mustang flashed by above them, blackening out the sky momentarily, Schulze yelped out in agony.

'My shitty left wing!' he cursed. 'The bastard got me.'

'On your feet – quick,' von Dodenburg cried. 'No time for that now, Schulze.'

While the Mustang zoomed high into the leaden sky, preparing for another attack, they flung themselves into the battered Tiger.

'Let's go,' van Dodenburg ordered breathlessly, as Schulze slumped behind the cannon, his broad face pale.

As Matz crashed home the gears and the big tank started to rattle towards the railway embankment close by, von Dodenburg swung the turret MG round to face the Mustang. Howling hideously, the Ami plane came hurrying in once more. They heard the crackle of cannon-fire. Twenty-millimetre slugs started cutting the air all around them, gouging up earth in angry bursts behind the Tiger.

Von Dodenburg pressed the trigger of the MG. Tracer streamed towards the Mustang with its great silver stars. He had missed. The next instant the plane soared over his head, almost knocking him from his perch with its howling slipstream, before racing straight upwards into the sky. Desperately he changed the cartridge belt, cursing madly because the MG barrel was already red-hot and burning his fingers. While he did so, his eyes swept the horizon looking for better cover. Then he spotted it – a small opening beneath the railway, perhaps constructed by the engineers of the Reichbahn to allow the farmers easy access to their fields beyond.

'Matz,' he cried above the howl of the plane, coming in for the attack once more, 'head for that tunnel over there!'

'Our arse will stick out!'

'Damn you, Matz, do as you are told – I don't care if your eggs stick out! That's our only –'

The rest of his words were drowned by the Mustang's eight cannon. Rockets drenched the whole area in their burning light. The Tiger reeled as one hit a nearside boogie. For one frightening moment, von Dodenburg thought she would throw a track, but Professor Porche's brainchild had been well constructed. The Tiger rumbled on towards the cover of the tunnel. And then the Ami pilot made a mistake. Confident of his kill, he broke right, instead of zooming upwards at 400 mph. To reduce speed even more, he lowered his undercarriage. Now, coming in round for the last attack, his

speed was less than three hundred, and his fire-spewing exhaust was directly in von Dodenburg's sights. The SS colonel did not waste the opportunity offered him.

He pressed the trigger. A vicious stream of tracer hit the Mustang. Pieces of metal started to fly from its fuselage. The tail disappeared. Desperately the pilot tried to control the crippled plane as thick white glycol started to stream from the engine. Von Dodenburg did not relax his pressure on the trigger. He had no sympathy for these impersonal Ami and Tommy killers, who had murdered with impunity these last few months. The tracer struck the plane over and over again, tearing great lumps off, as the frantic pilot tried to ride it to the ground in one piece.

One wing hit the side of the railway embankment, crumpling like a banana skin. The Mustang somersaulted. Its blue-painted belly struck the line in a cloud of dust. It bounced up twenty metres into the air. Crashing down the next instant, just as Matz reached the safety of the tunnel, it burst into flame, silhouetting the trapped pilot against the blaze, a panic-stricken figure clawing frantically at a canopy-cover which would not open. But von Dodenburg's attention was already elsewhere. In his dying agony, the Ami had called for his running mates. Five black dots were silhouetted against the darkening sky, racing towards the burning Mustang, sensing blood, eager to finish off the tank trapped beneath the embankment for good.

'Heaven, arse and twine!' Schulze cursed weakly just before he passed out, hand clutched to the gory mess of his shoulder, 'the bastards have really got us by the short and curlies now, sir...'

CHAPTER 16

'Gentlemen,' the King said, raising his glass to the assembled American generals, 'm-m-may I give you a t-t-toast?'

Eisenhower, Bradley, Patton and the rest, now flushed with good food and wine, raised their glasses dutifully. They knew that the British King had come to Belgium specifically to boost Monty's morale after the failure of his Arnhem drop; but still this visit to Hodges's First Army HQ was a nice gesture and as an ebullient Patton had commented a little earlier to Eisenhower, 'Hell, Ike, the guy did give me another medal, didn't he?'

'I would like to wish you s-s-success over the J-J-Jerries in Aachen in the next forty-eight h-h-hours.'

'I'll second that, sir,' Eisenhower said, his broad face split in a happy grin. He raised his glass.

The top brass followed suit, and settled down to an evening of military small talk, with the irrepressible Patton dominating the conversation, as usual, punctuating his stories with vicious stabs of his big cigar which he used as if it were a bayonet. 'Why,' he chuckled in his strangely high-pitched voice, speaking of the thievery of the Tunisian Arabs during the North African campaign, 'I must have shot a dozen Arabs myself.'

King George VI looked impressed. 'I say, is that s-s-so?' he stuttered.

Eisenhower, a little flushed now from his bourbon and branch water, winked at Bradley, Patton's superior, and asked, 'How many did you say, Georgie?'

Patton pulled at his expensive cigar. Then his thin tough face relaxed in a mischievous grin. 'Well, maybe it was only a half a dozen.'

'How many?' Eisenhower persisted. At the bottom of the table, running the length of the bare dining room in the commandeered Belgian château, the First Army Corps Commanders laughed at Patton's discomfort. It was good to see old 'Blood and Guts', commander of the heartily disliked Third Army, taken down a peg or two.

The big general hunched his shoulders and laughed. Then he turned to the King, and said, 'Well, at any rate, sir, I did boot two of them squarely in the – ah,' he caught himself just in time, 'street at Gafsa!'

The King laughed uproariously. 'I s-say,' he stuttered, 'that's weally

wich, P-P-Patton!'

It was just at that moment that an anxious aide appeared at the door of the candle-lit dining room and crooked a hesitant finger at General Collins. 'Sir,' he whispered, cupping his hands around his mouth carefully. 'Urgent.'

Collins inclined his blond head towards the head of the table. No one seemed to notice. The top brass was engrossed in another of Patton's scurrilous stories. Hastily he slipped through the door.

Down the corridor, some cook or other was singing, 'The officers they give us can stand up to the worst. You find 'em every weekend, shacked up with a nurse!' in a low monotone.

'What is it, Jones?' he asked swiftly.

The aide's eyes gleamed. 'Good news, sir! The Big Red One's just reported they've taken Crucifixion Hill. Thirty minutes ago. Colonel Cox's Second Battalion report they're only one thousand yards from the nearest foxholes of Hobbs's 18th Infantry.' He stopped expectantly.

'Goddam!' Collins yelled and punched his fist into he palm of his other hand, his eyes gleaming wildly, 'that's the best goddam news I've had in the whole goddam campaign! Now we can really root hog!'

In the kitchen, the cook sang, 'The coffee that they give us, they say is mighty fine. It's good for cuts and bruises, in place of iodine.'

But Lightning Joe did not hear the dirge, not the muted laughter of the top brass, nor the persistent rumble of the heavies, the background music of war. All he heard were the magic words – one thousand yards. One thousand yards more and the Aachen gap was closed for good!

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The bunker was heavy with the stink of sweaty feet. But nobody seemed to notice. The men of Cox's Second Battalion no longer had the sensitive noses of civilians. In these last two years they had smelled too much explosive, too much blood, too much death. Packed close together on the straw they slept or talked in low whispers, while the guns pounded away outside. A few just lay there, wide awake, not talking, but smoking cigarette after cigarette as they stared into the darkness.

In a couple of hours, they would be the point of the final attack to close the gap; and those who were awake knew what that would entail in the way of casualties. Every one of them had written his last letter home, which had

been collected personally by the company commanders lest they revealed anything about the forthcoming attack. The only magazine they possessed, a tattered copy of Yank, had done the rounds earlier, read from cover to cover by every GI until it had been finally consigned to the big can, which held the scanty supply of latrine paper.

Someone laughed suddenly. It was an uncanny sound in the middle of the night in that tense stinking bunker.

'What the hell you laughing for?' a sergeant cried angrily and the sleeping men stirred uneasily.

'Because if I didn't laugh, Sarge,' one of the smoking men said softly, not turning his head in the direction of the angry NCO, 'I'd go nuts!'

The hours passed leadenly. Outside the roar of the artillery grew steadily louder. Now Cox's men could no longer sleep. Grumbling sleepily at the 'God awful racket', they sat up and yawned, shivering the next instant with cold – and fear.

The sergeant who had complained started a game of poker. But it petered out quickly. The sergeant tucked away the money in his olive drab shirt pocket.

'Listen, fellers,' he announced, 'I've got forty dollars in this roll. If I buy it in this push, split the dough between you and play one goddam hot game of poker in my memory, will ya?'

The men laughed too loudly, even the man who had protested he would go nuts. They were all wide awake. The artillery barrage was reaching a crescendo. It wouldn't be long now. A thin sliver of grey light, heralding the dawn, slipped in under the bunker's great steel door.

'Looks like a great day for the Purple Heart,' someone said gloomily.

'I wouldn't mind a Purple Heart,' another soldier commented.

'Depends where you get it,' a third said. 'In the leg okay. In the guts, no thank you, brother.'

'Trench foot is the best,' a bespectacled corporal said scornfully. 'I thought even you dumb oxes knew that. It's pretty lousy at first when the medics take your shoes off. It's like as if you was walking on needles or some wise guy was giving you a hot foot. But brother it got me ninety days in hospital back in North Africa with real white women nurses. Hot damn!' He rolled his eyes expressively.

'What about false teeth?' a pale-faced rifleman with freckles said. 'I heard if you lost your choppers they took you out of the goddam line and sent

you back to the rear to get new ones made.'

'You heard wrong, soldier,' the sergeant said. 'What the hell do you think you're here for – to shoot the Krauts with your Garand or bite the bastards to death?'

'Oh, what the hell you guys running off at the mouth for?' grunted a burly older staff sergeant, cigar at the corner of his tough mouth. 'Purple Heart, trench foot, goddam false teeth!' He spat on the straw. 'Hell, the Krauts ain't got nothing in front except a lot of old guys with glass eyes and wooden legs! Don't you guys know that they're scraping the bottom of the barrel on the Aachen front?'

'I don't care if the guy behind that gun is a syphilitic prick who's a goddam hundred years old, Sarge,' the pale-faced rifleman said. 'He's still sitting behind eight feet of concrete and he's still got enough goddam fingers to press triggers and shoot bullets.'

'Now, see here, soldier,' the staff sergeant began, but he never finished.

Outside, the whistles started to blow and the same old coarse voices commenced calling the same old orders: 'All right, youse guys – get ya arses out here. Don't ya know there's a goddam war on?'

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At the Quellenhof, Donner raged. 'In the name of God,' he yelled at a mud-covered Schwarz who had just managed to pull the couple of hundred panzer grenadiers still alive off Crucifixion Hill, 'Where is Colonel von Dodenburg?'

Schwarz, swaying with fatigue and hunger, licked his blood-scummed lips. 'He carried out your orders, sir,' he said hoarsely. 'Went off to stop the Ami drive on the Rimburg front. There was the CO and Officer-Cadet Krause.'

In his agitation, Donner thrust out his glass eye and ran it through his blood-tipped fingers. 'So this is what the premier regiment of the Armed SS has come to, Schwarz – the CO and a seventeen-year-old boy trying to stop a whole enemy division?' Suddenly he buried his ruined face in his hands. 'My God,' he sobbed, 'where is von Dodenburg?'

***

The Ami fighters had gone. The whole countryside, still covered in the grey-

white of the false dawn, was alive with enemy troops. Throughout the night they had heard the persistent rumble of their tanks and trucks and once they had seen a long line of lights heading towards Aachen as a confident Ami convoy drove by. Soon von Dodenburg knew they would have to make a bolt for it before they were trapped completely. But how?

Schulze, slumped in the seat next to him, groaned. Von Dodenburg opened his eyes. Schulze was badly hit, he realised that. The big NCO had tossed and turned the whole night long, while he and Matz had taken turns as sentry.

let me have a look at that shoulder, Schulze. Matz, flash your torch over here, but keep it shaded.'

Von Dodenburg ripped away the burnt, bloody shirt from the wounded NCO's heavily muscled shoulder. The wound was thick with black caked blood, congealed around the jagged silver fragment of a twenty-millimetre shell. In the thin blue light, he could just make out the faint red line of blood poisoning running into the matted hair of the ex-docker's powerful chest.

'The body beautiful,' Schulze said weakly, his half-closed eyelids flickering. 'Takes anybody's breath away... so exciting.'

Von Dodenburg looked at Matz. Outside another Ami convoy rumbled across the fields. The one-legged NCO licked his cracked lips.

'Don't look so pretty, sir,' he voiced von Dodenburg's unspoken fear. 'And that pong too.' He hesitated. 'I hope it's just the old sergeant-major's natural stink – and not gas gangrene.' He tapped his wooden leg. 'That's the bastard that did for me.'

Von Dodenburg knew what Matz meant. If some of the dirty cloth from Schulze's shirt had been forced into the wound, he was in for bad trouble. Even Diedenhofen, as much as he loved his SS men, would have no compunction about whipping off Schulze's arm, rather than leave it and risk the big NCO's life.

'What do you think, Matz?'

Matz flicked off the torch. Schulze's eyes closed and he relapsed into unconsciousness again, his breath sharp and shallow. Matz did not speak for a moment. 'The best thing, sir, is to get him back to the bone-menders as quick as possible. But –' he hesitated.

'Go on.'

'Well, sir, I think we ought to get that lump of lead out of him. God knows how long it's going to take us to get back to our own lines and by then

the damage might be done, if we leave that in his shoulder.'

Matz flicked on his torch again. With his free hand, he reached down into his dice-beaker and whipped out a long sheath-knife, decorated with the diamond-shaped swastika of the Hitler Youth. 'Got it when I was a youth leader before the war. Kept it ever since.' He ran a horny thumb over its blade. 'Sharp as a razor. The tip's like a needle.'

Von Dodenburg looked at the knife. 'We've nothing to deaden the pain,' he said. 'And hygiene.'

'Leave it to me, sir. It won't be the first time. In Russia in '43, I whipped two toes off a corporal with frostbite in two seconds flat. As for hygiene.' He ripped open his flies and standing upright on the turret aimed a hot stream of yellow urine at the knife's blade. 'They say my urine'll kill anything, ever since I had the Spaghetti clap this spring.' As the liquid dribbled down the side of the Tiger, he turned and bent over the unconscious Schulze.

'Sir, you'd better get a good grip on the big bastard. He's strong as a bull. And as soon as he feels this inside him, he's going to kick up something horrible.'

Von Dodenburg nodded his agreement. He sat with his whole weight on the wounded man's good shoulder, twisting him sideways so that he could grab his elbows, pull his arm back and expose the wound to its full extent. Matz clamped the torch between his teeth, took a firm hold of the dripping knife and plunged the razor-sharp blade into the side of the wound.

Schulze screamed. His great body heaved like a tied-down stallion. Von Dodenburg exerted all his strength. He heard the knife scrape sickeningly against the shoulder bone. Schulze screamed again, his spine arching sharply with agony. Von Dodenburg freed one hand hurriedly and stuffed his dirty handkerchief into Schulze's wide-open gasping mouth.

Matz worked rapidly, the sweat standing out in dull pearls on his forehead, the knife digging deep into the flesh around the wound as he eased the shell fragment out. What Schulze felt neither man knew; the dirty handkerchief gagged whatever cries he made. But a sweat-lathered von Dodenburg, fighting desperately to keep him still, could well imagine that Matz's knife must feel like a red-hot poker, stabbing and gouging in the wound.

And then Matz spat the torch out of his mouth. He took a deep breath. 'Sorry, you big bastard he gasped and heaved. He turned the knife with a swift flick of his wrist. There was a soft sucking noise. Next instant the 20-

mm shell fragment clattered on to the Tiger's deck, and Matz was squatting on his haunches, fingers red with fresh blood, panting with exertion. As a suddenly exhausted von Dodenburg removed the gag, Schulze relapsed into a merciful unconsciousness. Outside the guns had stopped. Von Dodenburg knew what that meant: the Amis were going to attack.

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'Come on, you lucky bastards,' the older staff sergeant cried, 'earn a day's pay, will you!' He waved his carbine and slogged on down the hill into the grey cloud of artillery smoke.

Cox's entire Second Battalion was sweeping down the far side of Crucifixion Hill in an unbroken line. An abrupt blast of 88 fire directly overhead illuminated the card-playing sergeant on his right knee pumping shot after shot from his Garand into the Kraut positions. Another horrifying blast swooshed through the air. Darkness. Then the brilliant bluish flash of the shell exploding revealed the sergeant, still on his right knee, but without his head.

As he fell, the freckled-faced young PFC ran forward and began searching the headless body's pockets for the forty dollars poker money. The First's artillery crashed into action and silenced the 88. Cox's Second Battalion pushed on again, squelching over squashed bodies, slithering on squirming entrails. A sudden potato masher grenade threw the man who couldn't sleep into a deep foxhole. He found himself wedged face to face with a Kraut. The German was as surprised as the American. For a long moment the two of them stood there transfixed. The American had a rifle; the German none, but the trench was too narrow to use it. The American grabbed his commando knife. He thrust the brass-knuckled grip into the German's mouth, who reeled back spitting teeth and blood. With all his remaining strength, the man who couldn't sleep stabbed the knife into the German's stomach. The Kraut gasped, 'Oh, holy Mother... holy Mother!' The American felt the hot blood spurt up his right arm. He pulled the knife out and rammed it home again. Again and again. The Kraut's body sagged. His knees gave way beneath him. The man who couldn't sleep reeled and vomited.

Behind him a coarse official voice shouted. 'Jesus H. Christ, man, don't kill 'em all – we need some cruddy prisoners!'

Cox's artillery officer looked at the smoking hole filled with dead and

dying men, which a moment before had been one of his 75s. Little bits of human anatomy were strewn from one end of the pit to the other. The maimed bodies of his artillerymen had poured blood and guts over the earth so that the ground had first turned purple and was now beginning to go black. Their extremities seemed to be wriggling still, as if they were trying to rejoin the bodies from which they had come.

The artillery officer had seen it all many times before. He tried to reassure his shocked men. 'The Kraut 88,' he lectured them as if he were back at the Point and not in the middle of a battlefield, 'is no wonder weapon. It is merely a dual-purpose gun with a jacketed barrel, an easily detachable set of breech rings, a supported interchangeable A-tube, a carriage consisting of an upper carriage with a protective armour shield, a buffer fitted into the barrel cradle, a hydro-pneumatic recuperator fitted above the barrel and a special trailer which is fitted with pneumatic tyres and is drawn by a half-track.' He smiled at them, confident that he had his men under control again, while they, faces white with shock, stared back at him as if he had suddenly gone crazy. 'In other words, the 88 is a gun like any other gun. There is no need to suffer from 88 fever, men. No need at all.' He peered at them through his gold-rimmed pince-nez. 'A gun like any other gun,' he repeated.

The rest of his words were drowned by the great hurrying rush of another 88 shell. A booming explosion sent shrapnel flying everywhere in the thick acrid yellow cloud of smoke of impact. When it cleared, the survivors saw that the artillery officer had succumbed to the '88 fever' himself. His headless body was crumpled in an untidy mess at the edge of the fresh brown shell-hole. And still the advance went on.

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Behind the crumbling German line, forced steadily backwards by the pressure of the two US divisions – Roosevelt's Butchers and the Big Red One – the rear echelon stallions started to retreat. 'Destroy, burn, leave nothing,' Donner's order had stated. And they carried it out to the letter. Every thirty seconds a vehicle laden with anything worth transporting rumbled off in the direction of Aachen, accompanied by the crump of another dump exploding. Speed, frenzy, horror were the order of the day behind the German front, as the Amis pressed home their attack. The gap between the two divisions was only a matter of yards now.

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Another Sherman was hit. The gunner's hair and uniform caught fire at once. He had been wounded in the leg by the panzerfaust rocket. All the same he dived through the open turret hatch. Pulling himself out, he grabbed the metal with both hands. The hot steel ate into the flesh as if it were butter, tearing it away in livid strips. He struck the ground, screaming, face first. He sat up in the swirling smoke and tore off his combat jacket. It came away in flaming shreds. All the strength had gone from his lower limbs, but he found that by digging his elbows into the ground and pulling, he could move about ten feet every five minutes. He started to crawl. As he gasped to the medics just before he died in agony: 'Brother, I'm not about to kick off just yet.'

And the veterans of the Big Red One who had been in North Africa went into the attack humming the words of their own divisional song:

'Dirty Gertie from Bizerte
Had a mousetrap 'neath her skirtie,
Strapped it on her kneecap purty,
Baited it with Fleur de Flirte,
Made her boy friends most alerty,
She was voted in Bizerte,
Miss Latrine for nineteen thirty.'

That was until the last German machine-guns opened and the song died on their lips as the lead struck their leading rank.

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The men of the Big Red One could see their comrades of the 30th quite clearly now, and Colonel Cox began to grow anxious lest his boys start hitting Hobbs's fellows by mistake. Staff officers made their cautious way into the firing line to ensure that no unfortunate accidents took place. The two divisions were only five hundred yards apart.

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'Lots of guys pass out,' the burly truck driver was saying to the two stragglers from one of the 30th Division's infantry outfits, as the three dug their spoons into cans of cold hash, 'The gas fumes get you after a while,' he indicated the back of his truck with his spoon, and the heaped rows of petrol jerricans, 'Sometimes you just keel over and sometimes you get real sick. You get lead poisoning. Looks like poison ivy. On a real hot day, you can see the fumes. Looks like heat coming off a railroad yard.'

Von Dodenburg, crouched in the bushes fifteen metres away, looked up the dirt road. No sign of any other Amis. He nodded to Matz, gripping Schulze's Schmeisser and held up his right hand, fingers outspread. Matz indicated his understanding. Five seconds and they would move in. Behind them a semi-conscious Schulze groaned.

'I remember our trucking company was billeted in this apple orchard in Normandy with the little apples just coming out and fuck me if the whole lot didn't go and die in a week from the gas fumes.' He flung away the empty can of hash. 'Now what do you guys say to that?'

'Yeah, it must be tough,' the younger of the two infantrymen said, the blue of the combat soldier badge decorating his dirty khaki, 'pretty damn tough in the Service of Supply. You ought to get a transfer to the infantry, soldier.'

'Aw you guys are pissing me,' the driver said smiling slowly.

'No,' the other soldier began, 'we know you guys are –'

He never finished the sentence. Matz stuck his machine pistol into his back. Then von Dodenburg was standing in front of them, Walther pistol levelled at their bellies.

'Hands up,' he snapped in his heavily accented English.

The three Amis standing around the parked 'deuce and a half' truck shot up their hands, their eyes suddenly fearful as they recognised the silver SS runes worn by the black-clad, hard-faced officer with the pistol. Von Dodenburg ran his swift gaze over them. The two infantrymen had dumped their rifles, and they were only armed with bayonets. The truck driver was unarmed. He nodded to Matz. 'All right, Sergeant, take those two heroes,' he indicated the pale-faced infantrymen, 'and get Schulze – and watch how they treat that shoulder of his. I don't want the bastard bleeding again!'

'Yessir,' Matz pushed the two infantrymen forward. 'Move,' he ordered. The soldier with the combat infantry badge bit his lower lip fearfully. 'You can't shoot us, sir,' he stammered. 'Not in cold blood.'

'I can,' von Dodenburg answered with a chill smile on his haggard unshaven face. 'But I won't – just yet. Now move.'

A few minutes later Schulze was stowed in the back of the truck, bedded down on the driver's blankets, with Matz and von Dodenburg crouched beside him, their weapons levelled at the terrified Amis' heads through the slit at the back of the cab.

'Now listen,' von Dodenburg said carefully after the burly driver had switched on the truck's engine. 'Your lives depend upon our getting to Aachen safely. If you make a mistake,' he clicked his tongue significantly, 'you are dead.'

'But the MPs, sir,' the driver protested. 'They might stop us.'

'Your problem,' von Dodenburg answered coldly, though his mind was racing, trying to imagine what problems might arise in their five-kilometre journey to the city. But he knew this was the only way to get through. The kilometre they had struggled across the fields since they had abandoned the Tiger in the tunnel had been a nightmare. Both he and Matz were exhausted. They had been unable to carry the wounded delirious sergeant-major any further. There was no other course open to them.

'All right,' he snapped, 'let us get started.'

The driver crashed home first gear and slowly the two-and-a-half ton petrol truck started to drive away.

Everything went smoothly until they reached the outskirts of Aachen itself. Now the steady stream of vehicles heading for the front started to congest. Twice they had to get off the muddy, pitted roads to let long ambulance convoys hurry by with their sirens howling and signs in their windscreens announcing in blood-red letters CARRYING CASUALTIES. The traffic still moving forward was mostly armoured now. They crawled by rear defence units, dug in grimly on both sides of the road, gripping their weapons in sweaty palms, as if the enemy might come storming out of the smoking rubble of the suburbs at any moment. They passed a road sign reading: 'RAISE DUST AND YOU'RE DEAD, BROTHER! THIS ROAD IS UNDER ENEMY FIRE!'

But they didn't need to be told that. The sledgehammer of sound was beating down regularly. Peering out of the sides of the truck, von Dodenburg could see the terror reflected in the faces of the infantry trudging towards the front. Their eyes shone hotly as if tears were close, their flesh was ashen and their mouths trembled every time another shell struck the quaking ground

ahead. All other vehicles had vanished from the littered, cratered road by now. They were alone with the infantry.

'Sir,' the truck driver gasped, muscles rippling as he swung the vehicle around another crater, 'Somebody's gonna stop us soon... What we gonna do then?'

'Leave that to me,' von Dodenburg said hoarsely. 'You keep on driving.' He looked at Matz and then at Schulze, lying on the dirty floor of the shaking truck, his breath coming in shallow gasps. He put his hand on the sergeant-major's burning hot forehead. He told himself fiercely that he was going to get the rogue through. Germany would need men like the loud-mouthed, cocky ex-docker in the terrible days to come. 'Don't worry, Matz,' he urged. 'We'll get through.'

Matz, the veteran, pursed his lips scornfully. 'I'm not worried, sir. I'm a regular, you know, sir. Not like this asphalt soldier here.' He jerked a dirty thumb at his companion of many a drinking and whoring session. 'I was wondering whether you'd recommend me for acting sergeant-major when that goldbricker goes into hospital. I mean while he's having a good time getting a fly feel at the nurses' tits, lying between clean sheets, I might as well get a bit of the glory. It'll look good on my records. Might get me a bigger pension.'

Von Dodenburg shook his head. 'Shit on Sunday,' he cursed, using the soldier's expression, 'you're even a worse rascal than Schulze, Matz. Yes, you'll get your temporary promotion. That is if we ever get out of this mess.'

'Stop,' shouted a bareheaded lieutenant, leaping up out of the rubble to their right, carbine at the ready. 'Jesus wept, are you guys sick of life? This is the goddam line!'

The burly driver hit the brakes. Helmeted heads raised themselves cautiously from the brick rubble on both sides of the road. Von Dodenburg, his heart beating wildly with shock, recognised the high-pitched burr of a Spandau somewhere ahead in the smoke-shrouded scene. The German front, he told himself.

'Well?' the lieutenant demanded, when the driver did not speak. 'What the hell are you doing so far forward with a gas truck? I thought you guys from the Red Ball Express didn't get this far up the front.' Still the driver didn't speak. Somewhere behind them a mortar started to howl obscenely. The red-faced lieutenant did not even jump. It was clear he was a veteran. Suddenly he noticed the three soldiers' strange silence.

'Hey, you guys,' he commanded, raising his carbine. 'Let me have a

dekko at your ID.' He turned to his platoon sergeant. 'Joe, come on over here –'

Matz fired. The men in the cab ducked too late. The two infantrymen's heads were blasted apart. Blood and bone flew everywhere. The windscreen shattered into a sudden spider web. The lieutenant standing in front of the truck flew backwards.

'Drive on!' von Dodenburg yelled frantically.

The driver, the side of his face and shoulder soaked in blood, crashed home the gear. The truck shot forward. Zig-zagging crazily, it roared down the street in first gear, followed by the wild angry fire of the GIs. Blinded by the shattered windscreen, the driver careened into a lamp post. He wrenched desperately at the wheel. The truck skidded to the right with a wild howl of protesting tyres.

'Hold the bastard!' Matz screamed in German. 'Hold it, man!'

Too late. The truck crashed into a heap of rubble. The driver shot over his wheel, smashed through the shattered windscreen and lay still, his head twisted at an unnatural angle, his neck broken.

'Here!' von Dodenburg grabbed Matz's machine-pistol and fired a wild burst towards the Ami's lines. Answering slugs pattered against the dead Americans. 'Grab a hold of Schulze – quick,' he gasped and fired another long burst at the GIs trying to edge their way in the cover of the shattered building towards them. The answering fire stopped momentarily.

Matz slapped Schulze hard across the face. 'Come on – wake up,' he yelled. 'We've got to make a run for it.'

Schulze groaned, but his eyes remained obstinately closed. Matz slapped his shoulder. Schulze screamed. His eyes opened.

'What?' he gasped.

Matz grabbed his good arm and tugged. 'Get to your feet,' he hissed. 'The Amis are only twenty metres away.

Weakly the big NCO allowed himself to be hauled up and led, swaying wildly, to the edge of the truck. Matz dropped first and cursed with pain as his wooden leg thrust itself into the socket. Schulze followed and collapsed on his knees. Matz hit him again. A thin trickle of blood flowed from his nose. Slugs were hitting the ground all around them now.

'For Christ sake – move!' von Dodenburg cried. 'I'll cover you – MOVE!'

Like crippled caricatures of soldiers, the NCOs began to stagger

towards the German lines, while their CO knelt and tried to hold the Amis off.

'Hold your fire,' a voice ahead commanded. 'It's two of our lads – from the Wotan!'

Sobbing like an athlete at the end of his tether, weaving from side to side with the strain, Matz supported the half-conscious bulk of the big NCO in the direction of the voice. Together they stumbled through the fallen masonry, tripping over the tangle of fallen wire, eyes narrowed against the thick acrid smoke; while behind them von Dodenburg swept the street from side to side keeping the Amis back. And then they tumbled into a hole, and helping hands were grabbing at them, and figures dressed in the black of the SS Wotan were shouting with joy: 'It's Matz and big Schulze... Matz and big Schulze!'

'The CO,' the sergeant-major gasped just before he passed out. 'The CO.'

They needed no further urging. In one crazy rush the panzer grenadiers were out of their holes and charging down the street, firing from the hip as they ran. 'WOTAN.. WOTAN... WOTAN!' their battle-cry was flung from their open mouths with fanatical, new-found energy. And von Dodenburg, crouched in the doorway of a destroyed butcher's, trying to fit his last magazine among the long-abandoned hooks and wooden chopping boards, let his Schmeisser drop into the rubble, relief overwhelming him. His men were coming to rescue him.

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At almost that very same instant on that October 16th afternoon, a patrol from Colonel Cox's infantry, led by Staff Sergeant Frank A. Karswell, set off to make the first physical contact with the men of the 30th Infantry. The Big Red One veteran did not get far. The patrol had just reached the main Aachen-Wuerselen highway when the enemy artillery barrage descended upon them. The patrol dropped as one and let the blast and heat sweep over them. Someone screamed and there was the smell of burning flesh. The burning houses to left and right swayed like gigantic loose back-drops in the theatre. When the survivors scattered for cover in the lull between the salvoes, Staff Sergeant Karswell was not with them.

His men had lost heart, all save the two skinny scouts, Privates Krauss

and Whitis. 'I'm for going on,' Ed Krauss yelled above the roar of the barrage. 'What about you, Evan?'

Whitis nodded. Leaving the rest behind, the two of them continued, creeping cautiously through the burning, smoking moon landscape, their bodies tense, waiting for the burst of MG fire which surely must come and cut them down at any moment.

A hundred yards. A hundred and fifty. Still they had not been halted. Suddenly Krauss stopped. 'Look – GI uniforms!' he gasped.

Even Whitis narrowed his eyes against the smoke. 'Hot damn,' he breathed, 'you're right, Ed.'

Almost at that same moment, the strange GIs spotted them. 'Hey,' they yelled joyfully, 'We're from K-Company. Come on up!'

'And we're from F Company,' Whitis and Krauss cried back. 'Come on down!' Obediently the other infantrymen started to file down the battle-littered, smoke-shrouded hillside to shake the hands and slap the backs of the two lone scouts.

It was 16:15 hours and Roosevelt's Butchers had finally linked up with the Big Red One. The Aachen Gap was closed at last; Germany's Holy City was cut off from the Reich.

BOOK IV – THE END

'There was an Austrian – a Jew to boot, if I am not mistaken – who wrote a long time ago, "In the time of the sinking sun, dwarfs cast shadows like giants". The sun is going down, von Dodenburg, and I do not want to live in the time of the dwarfs.'

SS General Donner to Colonel von Dodenburg.

CHAPTER 17

There was no sound save the harsh stamp of the young lieutenant's highly polished jackboots on the concrete of the hotel drive. Next to him the three Ami officers moved noiselessly in their rubber-soled combat boots. From the windows the curious, hollow-eyed staff officers stared down at the scene, while the HQ's battle-worn defence platoon fingered their weapons uneasily.

At the regulation ten paces from the Battle Commandant who was waiting with von Dodenburg at his side, the young lieutenant halted, clicked his heels together and flung up his arm in the German greeting.

'Heil Hitler,' he shouted smartly.

'Heil Hitler!' Donner returned the greeting.

The grey-haired Ami colonel, flanked by the two officers carrying the white flags, looked startled by the greeting. But Donner ignored them.

'What are these men doing here?' he rasped, although he knew quite well what the Americans wanted.

'Beg to report, General,' the young lieutenant said formally, 'that these officers are enemy parliamentaires. They wish to speak to you, sir.'

Donner nodded curtly and turned his terrible face fully to the Amis, noting with pleasure the look of horror on the face of the youngest of them. 'Does any one of you speak German?'

The grey-haired colonel said, 'Yes, General, I do.'

Donner wrinkled his nose and flashed a significant look at von Dodenburg. The SS colonel read his unspoken thought: the Ami officer must be a Jew. 'Well, then, what do you want?' he asked briskly.

The Ami colonel pulled a piece of paper from the pocket of his stained combat blouse and cleared his throat pompously: 'I have a message here from my Corps Commander, General Joseph Collins. He has asked me to read it to you, General. I shall read it first in the English original and then in German.'

'My good man,' Donner rasped, trying to control his temper, but raising his voice so that the spectators hanging out of hotel windows could hear, 'you can read it in Chinese, if you wish. All I am interested in is the German version.'

The grey-haired colonel flushed. He bent his head over the paper and began to read: 'The city of Aachen is now completely surrounded by

American forces. If the city is not promptly and completely surrendered unconditionally, the American Army Ground and Air Forces will proceed ruthlessly with air and artillery bombardment to reduce it to submission.'

The American looked at Donner significantly. Donner stared at some unknown object in the far distance, as if he were bored by the whole business. Behind him, von Dodenburg allowed himself a faint smile of admiration. The Police General was putting on a great show, for a commander who was completely cut off from the main force and whose total fighting strength was reduced to five thousand men, of whom Wotan's five hundred survivors were the only troops of any real fighting quality.

The Ami shrugged and began to translate. When he had finished he looked up at the German general standing on the bullet-chipped steps of the hotel and asked, 'Well?'

Donner fixed him with his glassy stare. 'Well, what?'

'Do you want to surrender to my Corps Commander?' He licked his dry lips. 'You know the consequences if you don't, General?'

Donner laughed scornfully. 'Consequences! You can no longer bomb us without endangering your own troops. If your ground people attack, they will have to fight us from house to house, from street to street. Aachen will become another Stalingrad for your Army. Can you afford to pay that price?'

'Well, then, what message do you want me to take to General Collins?'

'Message? A very simple one. He can go to hell – and if you aren't out of my area within the next five minutes, you will precede him there forthwith!' He turned to the elegant Army lieutenant. 'Take these men back the way they came.'

The American colonel's mouth dropped open. Across from him, Major Schwarz, black eyes gleaming fanatically, dropped his hand on his pistol holster significantly. The Americans took the hint. Swiftly they turned and started moving back down the shell-littered road, carrying their white flags with them disconsolately.

Donner did not even bother to look at them. Instead he turned to the spectators. 'Listen, soldiers. Our position is not so desperate as some of you might think. We are dug in in an excellent position. We have food for two months. Reichsmarshal Goering has promised personally to keep us supplied with ammunition by air and already the Führer's planners are working out a scheme to break open the Ami ring around the city and relieve us. I expect, therefore, that each and every defender of the venerable Imperial City of

Aachen to do his duty to the end, in fulfilment of our Oath to the Flag. I expect courage and determination to hold out.'

He flashed a hard look around their battle-worn faces, knowing only too well how limited their staying power was. Snapping to attention, he thrust up his arm in that salute to a man who had brought new hope to a ruined, chaotic Germany a mere eleven years before: 'Long live our Führer Adolf Hitler and our beloved Fatherland. Sieg Heil!' The courtyard echoed and re-echoed to the iron stamp of their heavy boots and the great answering cry of 'Heil... Heil... Heil!' In the white-stripped trees, the black crows rose in alarm, croaking their hoarse protests.

Donner waited a moment or two for the sound to die away and then he said. 'Now we'll show the Ami bastards what we German soldiers are made of. Major Gehlen!'

'Sir,' the red-faced artillery major answered from a second-floor window.

'I want all guns to fire a five-round salvo at the enemy positions.'

'But that's our total ration for the day, sir,' the artillery commander protested.

'I don't give a damn. Fat Hermann, that's Goering to you young nipple-nibblers, will provide us with more. I'm going to show the pompous, over-confident swine over there that they haven't won the battle for Aachen by a long chalk yet.'

As the first howl of the six-barrel electric mortars tore the still afternoon apart, von Dodenburg grinned and hurried back to his quarters to fetch his battle equipment. Donner had given a tremendous performance. Now he would have to be ready to withstand the Amis' answer.

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'The arrogant, pig-headed Kraut bastard!' Lightning Joe raged in Huebner's cellar Command Post after the staff officer had departed who had brought the news. 'Doesn't he know that the chips are really down, Clarence?'

'Apparently not, sir,' Huebner answered, a little pleased to see Lightning Joe so rattled, as the first shells from the Kraut *Screaming Meemie* six-barrelled mortar began to explode all around outside. 'Just get a load of that.'

'Yeah, I hear it,' Lightning Joe said, pacing the cellar grimly, ignoring

the white dust falling from the shaking ceiling on to his gleaming lacquered helmet, embellished with the polished yellow stars. 'The Kraut general must be absolutely nuts. Doesn't he know he's had it?' He pulled himself together, stopping in mid-stride and swinging round to face the old man. 'Okay, if that's the kind of ball he wants to play, I'm the guy who can give him it. And how! Okay, Clarence, what's the deal? What are you going to do now?'

General Huebner rose heavily and poked a fat forefinger at the map of Aachen. 'The Kraut is strapped for bodies, sir, as you know. Intelligence estimates that the crazy Kraut commander has got five to six thousand men at his disposal. But they're enough to give us a hard time, especially fighting as they are in an easily defensible built-up area.' He paused.

'Go on, Clarence,' Collins urged, as the sounds of the surprise barrage started to die away, to be replaced by the cries of the wounded shouting for the aidmen. He knew that Huebner wanted more men. But he knew too that Huebner wasn't getting them. He needed all the muscle he had for the drive to the Rhine; Huebner would have to take Aachen with what he could spare from the Big Red One.

'So, sir, I can't risk my doughs in all-out attack. The Krauts would slaughter them. What I intend to do,' he pointed to the map, 'is to slip Colonel Seitz's 26th Infantry into the city here and here. The left wing will cut its way right across the place from its jumping-off place on the Aachen-Cologne railroad.'

Lightning Joe nodded.

'At the same time, Seitz's right wing will strike out for these three hills – here. They dominate the city's northern fringes, in particular, the Lousberg – the troops call it 'lousy mountain'. It rises to a height of nine hundred feet and casts a shadow over almost the entire city.'

Collins held his hand up, 'Spare me the guidebook details, Clarence,' he said.

'Sorry, sir. Well, once we've got the three hills, we've got the whole city laid out in front of our artillery, as if it were spread over a plate. Then we go in for the kill. The Kraut HQ at the Hotel Quellenhof. Once the head's gone, the body'll flop down and die.' He smiled, pleased with himself. 'I think it's the best plan to take the place with the minimum of loss. Hit the head and let the guts die of their own accord.'

Lightning Joe was silent as he considered Huebner's plan, glancing from time to time at the map of Aachen. The cellar shook as a convoy of self-

propelled 155 cannon rumbled by on their way to the front. He waited till the last one had disappeared before he spoke.

'You can see the weakness of the plan, can't you, Clarence?' Huebner's sallow face flushed. 'No, sir,' he hesitated. 'I'm sorry to say I can't.'

'Don't be sorry,' Lightning Joe said with a brief smile. 'That's what a corps commander gets paid for – to shaft over-confident divisional commanders. Your plan is excellent in so far as it doesn't get the main body of Seitz's infantry involved in god-dam street fighting. Capture the heights and the town's yours. You can blast the place to all hell until the Krauts are begging you to be able to surrender. Excellent, as I've just said. But look at your flank – how exposed it is! Up where you've linked with Hobbs's 30th, your guys are pretty thin on the ground. One of those damn Kraut counter-attack artists could come barrelling in from the north one dawn and then you'd look kinda funny when they'd broken through the line and hit Seitz in the flank. They could be cut off just like that – and they'd have no built-up area to protect them or dig their toes into. Then it would be your turn to know what it's like when the head goes.' He looked challengingly at the older man. 'Do you read me, Clarence?'

'I read you, sir,' he answered unhappily. 'But what do you suggest as an alternative?'

'Nothing,' Collins answered a little maliciously, pleased to see Huebner caught on the hop for a change. 'I've no bodies to spare to beef up the 26th. Besides I don't want this Corps to do another Brest. Ten thousand casualties wasted on a useless port? I don't think so. Aachen is not going to be another pyrrhic victory for the United States Army. You play it the way you've planned.' He paused for breath, the smile vanishing from his handsome face.

'And?'

'And? Well, Clarence, you'd better keep one good eye cocked over your right shoulder all the time you're attacking those three hills. Otherwise,' he looked challengingly at the older man, 'the Krauts are gonna catch you with your drawers down. Good afternoon, Clarence.'

But for once, General 'Lightning Joe' Collins was mistaken in his estimate of the direction from which the German attack would come.

CHAPTER 18

The stench of the tunnel when the ancient, wrinkled, civilian had finally prised open the sewer lid hit von Dodenburg in the face like a physical blow. It was a compound of human waste, the coppery stench of blood and disinfectant from the dressing station drains and the heavy cloying odour of creosote.

The civilian chuckled at the look of disgust on the officer's face. 'Nothing to worry about, sir,' he croaked in his Rhenish accent. 'Just the good old honest stink of human shit. I've lived and worked in it these last fifty years and it hasn't done me much harm.' He chuckled again and showed the yellow stumps of his crooked teeth.

'That's what you think, you dirty old shitehawk,' Matz growled. 'You stink worse than that place down there.' He indicated the dark sewer shaft below. Wrinkling his nose in disgust, he ordered. 'Get your shitty self to windward of me, will yer?'

'All right, that's enough, Sergeant-Major,' von Dodenburg snapped, instinctively keeping his voice low.

'Sorry, sir,' Acting Sergeant-Major Matz said and, kneeling stiffly on his good leg, joined the rest of the volunteers waiting crouched in the darkening courtyard of the city works office.

'All right, I'll repeat the drill,' von Dodenburg said softly. 'We go down in groups of four, each under an officer or NCO. We all follow the same route – at one-minute intervals to avoid confusion in the dark – until we reach what Mr Gerhardt here calls the main square. There we split up and spread out to our objectives. At eighteen hundred hours precisely, when Intelligence estimates the Amis will be standing down for the day,' he sniffed, 'they're real nine-to-five soldiers – we hit them – and we hit them hard!' His keen blue eyes, sunk in their dark circles of strain, flashed around the thirty volunteers from what was left of his tank crews who were prepared to tackle this dangerous mission. 'Five minutes to get inside their billets, five minutes to do the job, and then we beat it. I want bodies – a couple of prisoners will do – and one hell of a panic behind the Ami lines to put their generals off their stroke.'

'We'll scare the lace knickers off their lily-white arses,' Matz said

confidently, rubbing a dirty hand over his unshaven chin. 'Let's hope so, Matz. Now, any questions?'

A gangling, raw-boned farmboy, whose red hands hung out of a tunic which was much too small for him, asked awkwardly. 'Don't think I've got the wind up, sir. But how do we get back when the shit starts flying?'

The same way we went in.'

'But how do we get back to the – er – main square. I mean,' he added hurriedly, rather red in the face with embarrassment, 'it's dark down there and I wouldn't like to get lost in that shit pit.'

Von Dodenburg smiled. 'Don't worry, Trees. That problem's been taken care of. Every group leader has a piece of chalk of a different colour. I'm green, for example. Each group leader will mark his route from the main square to the sewer opening. On the way back, you simply play your torch on the markings which will lead you back to the main square assembly point. Major Schwarz or myself will be there then to guide you back into our own lines here.' He smiled at the embarrassed boy. 'Understand?'

'Yessir,' he answered, relieved. 'Understood. I didn't fancy getting lost down there in all that shit, that's all.'

'Go on,' Matz cracked. 'Shouldn't worry you. You farmers live in shit all your life. Probably have it on bread for breakfast instead of syrup for all I know.'

The volunteers laughed softly, including Trees. Von Dodenburg took a last look at the darkening October sky, lightened here and there by the pink of the Ami evening bombardment, the last of the day. He nodded to Schwarz who would bring up the rear. 'All right, old man,' he said to old Gerhardt. 'Let's get on with it.'

The civilian pulled at his thigh-high waders and without another word swung himself with practised ease over the top and began clambering down the dripping iron ladder into the nauseous, evil-smelling mess below.

Von Dodenburg took one last deep breath of the good air and steeled himself for the ordeal in front of him. 'All right, my section – follow me!'

'Christ,' Matz groaned as the stench hit him, 'the things I do for Folk, Fatherland and Führer. Now I've got to fight up to my eggs in shit.'

Stiffly he started to descend the ladder and in an instant the gloom had swallowed him up. The first section had moved off on the daring operation.

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It had been Schwarz who had suggested the mission in the first place. Von Dodenburg had just returned from a visit to Schulze, who was now coming out of his coma after Diedenhofen had operated on his shoulder to clean up the mess made by Matz's knife. A panting runner had summoned him to Donner's HQ.

Donner and Schwarz were standing in his office, faces tense and set, watching two sweating staff officers as they drew in the red arrows on the acetate cover of the big map of Aachen.

'What is it, sir?' he asked, putting down his machine pistol on the littered table.

'It's started, von Dodenburg,' Donner rasped, not taking his eyes off the new arrows. 'They're coming up on both sides of the Wilhelmstrasse. There and there.' The telephone rang again, and one of the harassed staff officers took the call. 'Yes, yes, clear,' he said brusquely and slammed the receiver down. 'They've reached the crossroads at the Romerstrasse, sir,' he said to Donner, and began to pencil in another red arrow.

Donner groaned. 'Look at the strength they're putting in, von Dodenburg. I'm sure this is their main push.'

The hotel shook as one of the huge 155 cannon the Amis were now using in their attempt to reduce Aachen, opened up at less than six hundred metres range. Plaster dust streamed down from the cracked ornamental ceiling of the first-floor room. Donner did not notice it; his one eye was fixed on the map.

'But we can't be sure, sir,' von Dodenburg objected. 'It's clear that they're heading for the heights to the east of us. Once they've got those they can dominate all our positions if they can get artillery up there. But the Ami generals know as well as we do that we can burrow into the cellars and still hang on for a while – at least as long as it takes the Führer Main Headquarters people to plan and launch their relief attack.'

Donner swung round on him and lowered his voice so that the two staff officers could not hear. 'There will be no relief attack, von Dodenburg.' His ruined face cracked into a parody of a grin. 'That was something I invented to raise the men's morale. We're on our own here, von Dodenburg. We stand or fall on our own merits and effort.'

'I see,' von Dodenburg said, mechanically registering the fact that Aachen would mean the end of Wotan. 'Well, sir, as I was saying: can we be

sure that this is to be the only enemy attack? Won't they try to throw in another one – say up towards the Peterstrasse – and cut off this HQ from the bulk of the defenders? Cut us into little groups in other words and deal with us individually. I don't think I need tell you what the morale of the men would be, once they had lost contact with this HQ.'

'You don't,' Donner agreed. 'It would be piss-poor. They would cave in like vanilla pudding on a hot day.'

'There could always be exemplary measures,' Schwarz broke in forcefully, 'Their officers and NCOs could threaten –'

Donner held up his hand to stop him. 'My dear Schwarz,' he said slowly and patiently, let us not fool ourselves. This garrison only holds out because the bulk of my heroes are more afraid of me than they are of the enemy. Once they think they are beyond the reach of my long arm, they'll surrender quickly enough, believe me. But you were saying, von Dodenburg.'

'In my opinion, sir, we cannot afford to take men from elsewhere on the perimeter to help stop this new drive, that's all.'

Donner nodded. 'You are right, of course. Just as you were with that Rimburg business. But damn it all, von Dodenburg, I've got to do something! Am I supposed just to sit here and let the Amis walk through our defences until they capture the high country and then watch them pour hot steel down our throats?'

'I was just trying to approach the situation objectively, sir.'

'I shit on objectivity,' Donner snapped angrily. 'I don't want objectivity – I want goddam answers!'

'General,' it was Schwarz. 'I think I've got an answer.'

'You?' Donner said. Von Dodenburg knew Donner's opinion of the one-armed major: he thought him brave, fanatical, loyal, but deranged. 'The man hasn't got his cups in his cupboard,' he had once confided to von Dodenburg. 'Hasn't had them for years. He's as crazy as a wild steer.'

'Yes, sir. My panzer grenadiers have been having the Aachen torrents ever since they've gone over to eating that horse meat goulash.'

'Aachen torrents?' Donner queried.

The shits,' Schwarz answered. 'The whole sewerage system in my part of the line was getting blocked up and I was worried about infections –'

'Get on with it,' Donner snapped irritably. The phone was ringing again, and he knew that it could only bring further bad news.

'Well, sir, I contacted an old civilian from the works office to help me

out. During my conversation with him I found out he knew the whole sewerage system like the back of his hand. He'd worked in it for fifty years.'

'My dear Schwarz,' Donner said, restraining himself with difficulty. 'All very interesting, I am sure. But for the life of me, I cannot see what the recollections of your ancient shit-shoveller has got to do with the present grave situation.'

Schwarz flushed. 'Very simple, sir. We cannot attack the Amis with any strength above ground. But a handful of determined men could give them a bad shock below ground.'

Von Dodenburg's eye gleamed. 'You mean through the sewers?'

'Yes, sir. We know from the civilians roughly where the Ami rear-echelon stallions are billeted behind the main station.'

'Yes, I know, in those former hour hotels.'

'Well, sir, if we hit their rear line there hard – destroying as much men and material as we could before the Amis could tumble to our way of getting there, I think we could give them a nasty shock – perhaps even throw their whole attack off there, at least, for a short while.'

Donner's single eye blazed with renewed hope and new life. 'By the great whore of Buxtehude, Schwarz,' he yelled, making the two sweating staff officers at the map swing round in alarm, 'I think you and your ancient shit-shoveller have got it!'

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Now von Dodenburg, close behind the ancient civilian, waded through the stinking filth, moving at what seemed to him a terribly slow pace. But Gerhardt would not be hurried. He did not seem to notice the terrible stench. Swinging his flickering carbide lantern from side to side on the white-caked dripping walls of the main sewer, he ploughed steadily on through the hot steaming human waste, as if he were taking a summer stroll in Aachen's Farwick Park.

Behind von Dodenburg, Matz with his Schmeisser held high above his head, gasped thickly. 'Can't you get that ancient sow to move a bit faster – I can't stand this much longer. If I puke one more time, I'm going to lose my ring for good.'

Gerhardt glanced at the one-legged sergeant-major. 'I shouldn't be so nasty if I were you, Sergeant-Major,' he croaked. 'I just might take it into my

noddle to leave you down here –and then where would you be?' He chuckled throatily. 'Besides,' he added, running a filthy gnarled hand through the liquid, 'this stuff's liquid gold, if you would but know. Makes things grow better than all the horse shit in the world.'

'Why don't you rub it into your scalp then, you bald-headed old coot?' Matz growled. 'Might make yer shiny locks grow a bit more.'

Von Dodenburg grinned thinly and waded through the stinking mire. Time passed leadenly. Once they were startled by a gigantic shadow which blocked out the side of the sewer, flickering slightly in the white light of the old man's carbide lamp.

'What in the name of Jesus-Mary is that?' Trees, the Bavarian farmboy, asked fearfully.

The civilian clapped his dripping hands loudly together. The shadow slipped away with the soft patter of clawed feet. 'A rat,' he croaked, 'There's a lot of 'em down here. They were skinnier before the war though. But now there's plenty of grub for them down here. You'd be surprised at the kind of eats they can find in the sewers in wartime.' His worn old voice echoed hollowly along the length of the dark, stinking tunnel.

'Colonel,' Matz moaned. 'Can't you order the nutty old arse-hole to knock it off, please? He gets on my tits with that laugh of his. Drives me up the wall.'

Von Dodenburg ignored the plea. He was too concerned with keeping his footing in the slippery mire. They plodded on. Then when it seemed that they would never escape the waist-high, hideously bubbling liquid, it started to give way to cold water which drove away the overpowering stench within a matter of seconds.

'We're getting there,' the old man informed them. 'The main square isn't much farther now.'

He wasn't wrong. Two minutes later they plodded round a bend, splashing hastily through the clear water in their mired boots to emerge into a large cave-like area, illuminated by the thin grey light falling from half-a-dozen gratings.

'The main square,' Gerhardt announced proudly, as if he were showing them Aachen's noble Cathedral Square. 'Over there exit to the Bahnhofstrasse. That one there is the Lagerhausstrasse. Before the war I used to spend many a happy hour looking up that one. The whores didn't use to wear any knickers in those days. Surprising what you saw if you looked long

enough. I remember one time –'

'Shut up,' von Dodenburg hissed, 'and put that shitty lantern out, will you?'

They could hear the stumbling progress, interrupted by the whispered curses and grunts, of the other sections. In dripping silence, they waited till they emerged around the bend, gasping with relief as they breathed the fresher air coming through the gratings above their heads, the section leaders snapping off their flashlights automatically.

Von Dodenburg waited till the last section had recovered its breath, and the one man who had been unlucky enough to slip and fall full length in the mire had managed to get the worst of the mess off his face with the help of the underground stream. 'All right,' he said softly, 'we're all here now. Check your weapons first. But keep it quiet.'

There was the muted sound of the men drawing back their bolts carefully, checking whether the long trek through the mire of the tunnel had affected their weapons. Here and there a man who had discovered a blockage of some sort worked his bolt a few times rapidly to ease it away. But finally they were all satisfied that their weapons would fire.

'Good,' von Dodenburg breathed, looking round their pale, tense faces. 'Everything seems all right. Take up your positions as the old man here calls out the street names.'

One by one the civilian, proud of his knowledge, called out the names of the individual streets, and the sections positioned themselves behind their leaders, chalk at the ready, eager to move off and leave the tunnel.

Von Dodenburg licked his dry lips. 'Happy landings, lads,' he called softly.

'Happy landings, sir,' they answered.

'All right, off we go – and give them hell!'

Splashing swiftly through the shallower water of the side drain, von Dodenburg led his little party, consisting of Matz, Trees and a young Hamburger named Frank, down towards the sewer opening behind the main station, drawing a broad green chalk line on the rough wall as he went. The light from the opening came closer and closer. He hissed a warning for them to be quieter. Behind him Matz gripped his Schmeisser more firmly. Then they were directly beneath the grating. Von Dodenburg stuck his pistol in his belt at the ready.

'Matz, bend down,' he whispered.

Von Dodenburg sprang lightly on his back. There was no sound from above. It was really getting dark outside now. He knew that the Amis had instituted a five o'clock curfew in their part of the city. The only people abroad now, therefore, would be enemy soldiers.

'All right, take the strain,' he ordered softly.

Matz tensed. With all his strength, von Dodenburg levered up the heavy iron grating. It came away with difficulty. He lowered it as gently as he could on to the cobbles and poked his head above the surface. No one! He heaved himself out and lay full length in the wet cold street, pistol in hand, surveying the ruins. There was no sign of the Americans, save for a burned-out White scout car at the corner next to a pile of dull brown C-ration cans. Ration cans, thrown away with their usual careless prodigality, were always a clue to the enemy's presence.

'Good, you can come up,' he hissed, not taking his eyes off the end of the street.

'They would never have done this in the old Army,' Matz grumbled as Trees stepped forward and used his broad back to lever himself out into the open, 'using a senior NCO as a sodding doorstep. What flaming well next?'

Cautiously they moved down the deserted street. To their right, they could see the chaos of the city station's shunting yard, filled with useless locomotives mocking the proud boast that had been painted on their sides in the good days. 'THESE WHEELS ROLL FOR VICTORY!' Everywhere dirty white flags made from towels and torn sheets hung from the ruins, but there was no sign of any civilians. They came to a corner and halted.

Suddenly they heard the soft shuffle of what could only be an American combat boot. Von Dodenburg tensed. 'Trees – the knife!' he hissed.

The farmboy drew his combat knife and tensed, the gleaming blade gripped in his red-knuckled hand. The Ami came round the corner. A big black sergeant, pistol at his hip, a bag in his big fist.

'Hands up,' von Dodenburg hissed.

For what seemed an age, the black soldier did not react. Then he muttered, 'Ah, go and shit in ya hat!' and dived for his pistol with swift determination.

Trees was quicker. His hand shot out. The Ami's voice ended in a thick-blooded gurgle as the knife penetrated his neck. Trees stabbed him again. The blood gushed out and splashed his knuckles. The sergeant's yellow eyes rolled upwards. Just as he was about to fall, Matz caught him.

'Come to mother, you black bastard,' he said.

'Lower him carefully,' von Dodenburg urged, as the Ami drowned in his own blood. 'Not a sound.'

But they were unlucky. In that very same instant the chatter of a Schmeisser started up close by, followed by angry shouts and the slower noise of an Ami machine-pistol. Matz let the dead man drop to the ground with the thud. 'They're on to us, sir!' he yelled and unslung his Schmeisser.

'You're right, Matz. Come on, lads.' Von Dodenburg started to run forward towards their objective. The operation, he told himself as the three men pelted after him, looked as if it might turn out to be a big balls up after all.

CHAPTER 19

Major Schwarz had been the first to spot the girl as his group doubled towards their objective. She could be seen through a dirty window, swaying back and forth on a kitchen table in a drunken parody of a dance; and her nubile teenage body was completely naked. He came to such an abrupt halt that the trooper behind him nearly crashed into him.

'Look,' he yelled hysterically, pointing at the window behind which the dark-haired naked girl danced to the delighted calls of the Ami soldiers and the music of a scratchy old gramophone record, 'a German girl dancing for those enemy pigs!'

'Sir,' one of his group protested, 'that's not our objective. If we open up _'

Schwarz didn't let him finish. Face contorted with hate, he pressed the trigger of his machine-pistol. The glass shattered. A line of red holes appeared across the girl's breasts. Her mouth sagged open. Her knees began to buckle beneath her. Schwarz fired again. Her face became a welter of blood and bone. She dropped to the floor.

A moment later all was confusion and the Amis were firing wild bursts everywhere.

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Panting heavily, von Dodenburg's section clattered past the shattered, bullet-pocked door into the hallway of the run-down hotel. Matz skidded on the stone-tiled floor and went full length with a wild curse. Somewhere beyond in the gloom, heavy boots clattered downstairs. An angry voice called something. Von Dodenburg lobbed his stick grenade upwards. There was a thick muffled crump, a flash of purple flame and an agonising scream. A door flung open. Von Dodenburg spun round. Von Dodenburg caught a glimpse of an Ami helmet.

Before he could react, Matz fired a burst from the floor. The Ami fell back screaming, his face a red pulpy mass without recognisable features. Trees sprang over the NCO and thrust open the door of the nearest room. It was filled with ashen-faced unarmed Amis sprawled out on makeshift beds

on the floor in their khaki-coloured underwear. He tossed in the stick grenade and closed the door hurriedly. Hanging on to the handle tightly, his lips moved soundlessly as he counted the seconds.

Crump. The door jerked wildly in his grasp like a live thing. Thick smoke poured from beneath it.

'Open!' Matz yelled above the screams.

Tress flung it open and sprang back. From his position on the floor, Matz sprayed the room's interior from side to side. Black-faced, bloody men staggered blindly out of the yellow smoke and were flung aside by the murderous fire.

Von Dodenburg pelted up the stairs. A naked man, khaki-coloured towel over his shoulder, was standing in an enamel bowl, washing himself. Von Dodenburg fired once. A red hole tore his white stomach. The Ami fell to his knees in the bowl, clutching his belly. Von Dodenburg kicked him in the face and ran on. The bowl slid across the floor, scattering bloody soap suds everywhere.

A white face peered down at him from the stair-rail, eyes wide with fear. Von Dodenburg reacted instinctively. Reaching up, he hooked his two front fingers in the man's nostrils, and heaved. The next moment Trees had plunged his knife into his throat and slit it as neatly as he might have done one of the pigs back on the farm.

An Ami grenade came rolling towards them from somewhere. Matz kicked it on down the stairs and yelled, 'Duck!' The four of them dropped to the floor. Shrapnel was zinging off the walls and a hot blast threatened to burst their lungs. Frank yelped as a piece tore off his little finger. They ran down the stairs again. Just as they reached the door, Matz flung a phosphorus grenade behind them into the hall. A soft plop. White steaming pellets of phosphorus everywhere. The hallway bright with angry red flame. Somewhere a piteous voice called, 'Say, buddy, won't you help me?... I can't see... Say, buddy...'

But the von Dodenburg section had no time for blinded Amis. They doubled into the crazy confusion of the street. Everywhere there were cries of rage, anguish and fear. Someone opened up with .5 inch Ami machine-gun until a harsh voice cried, 'Will you stop that goddam firing, man! You're firing into our own guys!'

Screaming like wild men, the four SS soldiers clattered down both sides of the street, lobbing grenades into each house that looked occupied,

lashing the facades with wild bursts of machine-pistol fire to keep the occupants down. A bare-headed soldier appeared at an upper window. Von Dodenburg shot him through the neck.

Suddenly an accurate burst of fire stitched a line of bullets across the road only five metres in front of them, blue sparks flying up as the lead struck the cobbles. They flopped to the ground, panting wildly. Sucking his bloody hand still, Frank lobbed a grenade in the direction of the pile of firewood from which the firing had come. It fell short. The next moment the machine-gunner opened up again. Lead struck the road all around them, as they hugged the wet cobbles, careening off with a dying whine.

The pineapple-shitter's well placed,' Matz gasped. 'Do we go back, sir?'

Von Dodenburg flung a glance behind him. The darkening sky at the end of the road was lit up by the brilliant fireworks of small-arms fire. 'No, it's as bad there as here. We've got to get through the bastard!'

'Sir?' Trees yelled. 'There's a can of gas over there. We could burn him out.'

Von Dodenburg nodded. 'Get it,' he commanded. 'I'll get a bucket on the opposite side of the road. Matz and Frank cover us! NOW!' Madly the two of them doubled off in opposite directions, followed by an angry burst of fire, which switched from side to side, but just continued to miss them. Von Dodenburg clambered frantically through the chaotic rubble of the abandoned house, looking in vain for a bucket. Outside Matz and Frank kept up a desultory fire, breaking off every time the unseen Ami gunner sprayed the cobbles at their feet. In the end von Dodenburg compromised with an ancient enamel chamber pot, its bottom covered with a chipped and faded Imperial eagle.

'Here,' he yelled through the window. 'Matz, catch this.' With all his strength he flung it towards the NCO.

'Oh, my aching back,' Matz cried. 'Now we're down to fighting the flaming war with piss-pots!'

Trees had skidded across the road in a shower of sparks, followed by a frustrated burst of machine-gun fire. Von Dodenburg took the opportunity offered him. Body crouched low, he doubled back to the others. A slug tore off an epaulette. Another struck the heel of his boot. But he made it, chest heaving frantically.

'Put some of that gas... into the pee pot,' he gasped. 'Quick.' Fumbling frantically, Matz unscrewed the cap and poured the gas into the strange

container.

'Trees, stand by with the grenades!'

The farmboy tugged the last two stick grenades out of his belt and curled his finger round the china ring of one of them. 'Ready, sir.'

'All right. When I throw this stuff, fling a grenade and drop – quick! Clear?'

'Clear!'

'Right then. NOW!'

Von Dodenburg sprang to his feet. The Ami reacted a little too late. With all his strength von Dodenburg flung the contents of the pot towards the pile of wood. It fell short. But that didn't matter. It was near enough, and gas had splashed onto the pile of firewood. As he ducked, Trees' grenade exploded. There was a burst of flame. A piteous scream. A few seconds later, the Ami came staggering towards them, hands clawing the air, his uniform alive with flames. Matz shot him neatly in the stomach. He dropped without a sound, his head in a puddle of burning gas.

'Come on,' von Dodenburg yelled. 'Let's get on!'

They needed no urging; the firing behind them was getting closer and closer.

In the next five minutes, they destroyed a line of Ami supply trucks with their remaining grenades, slaughtered a group of white-helmeted military policemen busy polishing their boots prior to going out on night patrol – 'well, that's one piece of bullshit they'll never have bothering them again', had been Matz's cynical comment – and shot up a large dormitory bedroom which, judging by the female underwear lying around, looked as if it had been used as an Ami brothel.

'I always said the Amis wore lace knickers,' Matz yelled, as they backed out, leaving the khaki-blanket-covered cots filled with dead and dying Amis and their whores.

But time was running out now. Von Dodenburg glanced hastily at his watch. They had been ten minutes above ground.

'Start moving back to the sewer,' he yelled above the confused snap and crackle of small-arms fire. Swiftly he pulled out his Very pistol and fired the violet flare, the signal for withdrawal. It soared high above the houses and bathed the chaotic scene of death and destruction below in its gaudy light.

They backed down the street, pausing and firing every few seconds, crouching close to the wall, spraying the street from side to side. A man

loomed up from a doorway. His eyes were red-rimmed, his lips drawn back in a wolfish desire to kill. A speck of foam hung from the corners of his mouth. There was a gleam of metal. But Trees was quicker with his knife. In one and the same instant, his big boot kicked the Ami in the crotch and, as he doubled up, gasping in agony, his knife thrust home into the man's back.

The American fire was becoming more organised. Officers were shouting everywhere, trying to bring back order to their confused troops. NCOs were setting up block positions, cursing and kicking their men into the hastily erected barricades.

The attackers ran into one. Hastily they turned and doubled down an alley. A high wall blocked their way. Von Dodenburg ran at it madly, followed by a shower of lead, and sprang upwards. His eager fingers clutched the top and missed. He screamed as the rough brick ripped away his fingernails.

'They went down there, Sarge – I saw them,' a youthful voice cried behind them.

Von Dodenburg charged furiously at the wall once again. This time his bleeding fingers caught a projecting brick. It was enough. With all his strength he pulled himself upwards and swung himself on top. They heard boots running in their direction. 'Trees,' he cried, reaching down.

Trees caught his fingers. Red-hot pain shot up his arms. Von Dodenburg bit his lip till the blood came. 'Quick, you bastard,' he muttered through gritted teeth, his arms feeling as if they were being pulled out of their sockets. Trees swung himself on top of the wall just in time and fired a wild but effective burst at the advancing Amis. They came to a hurried stop.

'What the hell you guys waiting for?' a beery voice cried. 'Get after them!'

'You, Frank!' von Dodenburg ordered.

'Watch my finger, sir,' Frank protested.

'Shit on your finger – come on.'

Frank joined the two men on the wall. Von Dodenburg looked down at the one-legged sergeant-major. He crouched below, busy fumbling at the straps of his wooden leg.

'What the hell are you doing, Matz?'

'Never make it with this,' Matz yelled back, finally undoing the leg. 'Here, farmboy, get a hold of this.' He hopped forward and proffered the leg to Trees. 'And treat it kindly – it's the only one I've got.'

A bullet whanged into the leg as Trees hauled it upwards. Matz cursed. 'Marmalade-shitters – don't even have any respect for poor old cripples!' he yelled.

'Come on, you cripple, then,' von Dodenburg bellowed. With the help of Frank, who was yelping with the pain of his finger, he hauled up the struggling one-legged sergeant-major. Seconds later, covered by the wall and with Matz, hopping as he went, with his wooden leg under his arm, they were racing towards the safety of the sewer. Seconds later, they had dropped inside and were swallowed up by its stinking gloom.

CHAPTER 20

Colonel Seitz, commander of the 26th Infantry, could not speak for a moment when he heard the news. His rage was too great.

'What the Sam Hill were you guys doing?' he roared at last at his pale-faced staff officers. 'Couldn't you figure that the Kraut might pull a trick like this?'

They remained silent. They knew Colonel Seitz's rages of old. It was better to say nothing.

After a while, Seitz pulled himself together. 'Okay, let's get on the stick. Tell the lead battalion to halt for the next two hours and dig in. I don't want them to be caught with their skivvies down by some Kraut counter-attack in the flank. Charley,' he swung round on a bespectacled staff officer, 'where's the nearest chemical warfare company? I want gas to smoke the bastards out of these sewers.'

The staff officers looked at the CO aghast. 'You can't mean that, sir?' Charley ventured. 'Gas?'

'I would not have said it if I didn't damn well mean it. Where is the nearest company?'

'Verviers, sir.'

'Too far away. The bastards'll escape us by the time they get up here. Flame-throwers – that's the answer,' he said determinedly. 'Okay, what I need is a plan of those sewers. Then we block them somewhere on the north-south axis along the *Wilhelmstrasse* – that's obviously the way they're making off back to their own darn lines! Once we've blocked them, I want volunteers with flame-throwers down there to smoke them out like rats – like rats,' he emphasised. 'Do you understand? ... What are you guys standing around for like spare pricks at a wedding? Let's get on the ball!'

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The sudden burst of fire through the grating in the main square caught them completely off guard. Frank fell dead and Trees hit the water, clawing the air in pain. Matz and von Dodenburg ran towards him and pulled him out. He was chewing his tongue and the saliva which dribbled down his unshaven

chin was pink with blood. His eyeballs were already beginning to slip upwards so that only a little of the white showed.

As the others scattered for cover and began trying to aim upwards at their unseen assailants, Matz cried. 'We can't let the shitty hayseed die like this, sir... He's choking to death.'

Von Dodenburg nodded grimly and tried to prise open his tightly shut jaws and release his tongue. Desperately he looked round for something with which to force them open. 'Matz,' he cried, 'give me your knife.' Another burst crashed through the grating, splattering lead everywhere. Bullets whined off the walls.

'No, sir. If he falls on it or rolls over,' Matz protested, 'he'll cut his damn tongue off.'

'Don't argue. Give me the knife! No, better if you stick it in when I lever his jaws open.'

With all his strength von Dodenburg forced open the farm-boy's jaws and Matz slid the knife between his lips. Immediately Trees started to grind his teeth on the metal, twitching convulsively. His breath became more normal and von Dodenburg sat back on his heels, cold with sweat, feeling he had saved the boy's life. But he was mistaken.

'Look at this, sir,' Matz said, removing his hand from below the boy. It was covered with blood.

Suddenly von Dodenburg was aware of a disgusting stench which didn't come from the sewer. He looked down at the boy's nether parts. His trousers were soaked with blood. He slid the knife out and slit open the trousers from the knee downwards. There was a cloying odour of rotting flesh.

'Turn him over,' he commanded.

Matz rolled the boy over. His buttocks were a mass of yellow-red blood. 'Haemorrhage,' Matz gulped. 'He's bleeding from behind. Shot in the gut. Von Dodenburg parted the boy's legs and tried to stop the bleeding with his hand. The blood seeped through his fingers. He grabbed a handful of mud from the bottom of the stream and clapped it against the boy's behind. It was useless. The blood still streamed through, sweeping aside the mud poultice.

'Sir,' Schwarz cried from the other end of the underground chamber, 'I can hear tanks. They're bringing up reinforcements. We'd better move.' Von Dodenburg looked down at the dying farmboy. He would never see his dirt-poor Upper Bavarian farm home again, herd the cows up to the higher

pastures in spring and slide the hay down in summer. He pulled out his pistol and placed it against the boy's right temple. The boy's eyes flickered open for a moment.

'Thank you, sir,' he breathed weakly. 'Sorry to have held you up.' He closed them again and von Dodenburg could see his pale lips moving to the words of some half-forgotten Catholic prayer. Von Dodenburg squeezed the trigger. The Walther erupted in his fist. The boy's spine curved like a bow. Then he fell back into the bloody dirt, mouth open, dead.

'Come on,' von Dodenburg yelled in the echoing silence, 'let's get the hell out of here.'

With Schwarz's group bringing up the rear and the old civilian in the front, guiding them with his stinking carbide lamp, they waded into the main sewer again. Now the rats seemed to be everywhere. Whether it was due to the frantic activity overhead or because of the growing dark, von Dodenburg could not tell. All he knew was that the loathsome brown-grey creatures were everywhere, fleeing the first flickering light of the old man's carbide lamp, but slithering under their feet again as soon as the gloom had returned.

'Ugh,' said Matz, pushing on behind the CO, 'gives me the creeps to feel those long-tailed bastards nibbling – even on my wooden leg!'

'Keep it down,' von Dodenburg urged, 'all of you keep it down. And you, old man,' he ordered the civilian, 'shade that light. We don't want them tracking us along the main sewer.'

There was silence now save for the men's harsh breathing and the slithering of the rats. But despite the fact that they were progressing steadily towards the safety of their own lines, von Dodenburg had an uneasy feeling that, up above, the Amis were keeping pace with them, only waiting for a suitable opportunity to spring the trap.

Time passed. They squeezed their way carefully past a barrier thrown down a manhole by the Amis. One by one, hardly daring to breathe, they crawled through the mass of old chairs, ration crates, timbers hastily slung below by the enemy, knowing that at the first indication of their presence, the Americans would start firing with all they had. They marched on. Now they were up to their waists in the thick stinking mire. Their pace began to slow down.

One of Schwarz's wounded boys passed out and sank below the surface to be hauled out by his comrades, their faces contorted in disgust at his appearance. Schwarz ordered two of them to take off their belts and tie them

round his arms. Thus they dragged the faeces-smeared boy on with them.

Von Dodenburg began to pray that they would reach their objective soon. He had had enough. His head started to spin with the fumes. 'How much longer, old man?' he asked thickly.

The civilian looked up at the dripping curved ceiling. 'Peterstrasse,' he announced after a moment. 'Horse piss corner!'

'What?'

'Horse piss. Horse piss corner, we used to call it in the old days. There was a stable up here. On winter mornings, the horse piss used to come pouring in here by the litre, all hot and steaming like –'

'Oh for Christ's sake, shut up, old man,' von Dodenburg interrupted, his voice full of disgust. 'Can't you think of anything but shit and piss?'

'It makes the world go round, sir,' he answered, not the least offended. 'Without it, nothing would grow. No shit and piss, and we wouldn't eat.'

Matz retched thickly. 'I'll never eat another goddam thing,' he croaked, pushing his way through the mire, Schmeisser held above his head. 'I swear I won't –'

He broke off suddenly. There was the clatter of a sewer lid being raised ahead and dropped on the cobbles of the road. 'Freeze,' von Dodenburg commanded.

A thin white torch beam cut into the green gloom ahead of them. They pressed themselves against the dripping walls, hardly daring to breathe.

'They're down there,' a hushed voice said. 'I'll bet my goddam bottom dollar they are... Joe, are you ready?'

'Sir.'

'Okay, we're ready, Joe, when you are.'

Von Dodenburg raised his pistol. He could hear the metallic sound of someone fiddling with some sort of apparatus. His brow creased in a frown. What the devil were the Amis up to? Should they make a break for it and push on while they still had a chance? Or should they –

'Colonel!' It was Schwarz. His face was blanched with fear.

'What?'

'A flame-thrower... they've got a flame-thrower up there!' Now the young CO could hear the soft hiss. Schwarz was right.

'Quick – let's make a run for it!' he yelled.

They surged forward in a panic.

'They're bolting!' a voice yelled from up above, 'Joe, get that damn

weapon of yours going!'

A hush. A roar. An angry tongue of blue-red flame shot into the sewer, curled along the walls and sought them out greedily. An SS man screamed. He fell into the mire, hands thrown up frantically, consumed by flame.

'Duck,' von Dodenburg screamed. 'Duck into the shit!'

They hesitated. The flame-thrower roared again. Once more the terrible hissing tongue flamed into the tunnel. The air trembled. The sour, choking stench of charring flesh and the copper odour of hot blood assailed their nostrils. The survivors flung themselves deep into the stinking mire and felt it drying hard above them. Then the horrifying fire was gone, and they were fighting their way out of the mud.

'Come on,' von Dodenburg croaked, wiping his face clean. 'As quick as you can!'

The survivors scrambled and waded through a morass of skinned, charred bodies, frozen into their last moment of desperate hysteria. Men screamed. Others flung away their weapons in their panic.

Von Dodenburg caught himself just in time. 'Schwarz,' he commanded. 'Stop!'

His helmet gone, his face blackened by smoke, Schwarz was self-controlled again. 'Sir?'

'I need you.' He spun round and faced the black-charred opening to the sewer. 'When I say fire, aim at that opposite wall. We must try to ricochet shots off it upwards. It's our one chance to try to stop them long enough for our people to round the next bend to safety.'

Schwarz drew his Walther. Behind them the survivors panted and grunted while the mud sucked and gurgled at their boots, pulling them down like quicksand.

'FIRE!' von Dodenburg yelled.

Both men pressed their triggers simultaneously. The pistol shots echoed like cannon fire. The seven-millimetre slugs struck the wall just behind the grating. The stone chipped.

Up above a voice cried out in sudden alarm, 'Get the hell away from there, Joe! The Krauts are counter-attacking!'

They heard a heavy piece of apparatus being dropped on the cobbles. That was enough for von Dodenburg.

'Come on,' he shouted, tucking his empty pistol into his holster, 'Let's get the hell out of here, Schwarz.' Knowing that it was only a matter of

seconds before the Amis overcame their surprise and reacted, they turned and began to wade through the mire and the bloody flesh of the dead.

The Amis pursued them all along their escape route. Time and time again the gratings ahead were flung open roughly and angry voices shouted to them to surrender before some new terror was launched at them. Phosphorus grenades that filled the tunnel with a burning white light and thick choking smoke; tear gas, which was harmless but which had them gasping and crying uncontrollably like children within seconds; satchel charges, containing twenty-five pounds of high explosive, which went off in the narrow confines of the tunnel with the impact of an exploding volcano. Still the procession of ghastly phantoms continued its progress, their heads swathed in their charred jackets, blindly ploughing their way forward behind Gerhardt.

The gas was affecting von Dodenburg's eyes more and more. He could only just see by narrowing them to slits. His eyeballs seemed as if they were bedded in thick sand and he had to keep blinking all the time. He noted automatically that his head was rolling from side to side like that of a drunkard. Time and time again he tried to control the rolling motion. But within seconds he had slipped back into it again. Now his legs began to lose all feeling; it was as if they were made of jelly. Around him, his men started to fall into the slush and were brought to the surface only by the determined efforts of their stronger comrades.

Time and time again, Matz rapped out that cruel reminder. 'MARCH OR CROAK.' And von Dodenburg, continually fighting off unconsciousness, realised in his odd moments of clarity, how true the phrase was. He held on to the thought with all his might. They had to reach the surface.

They edged their way carefully past the last Ami barricade –a rough, barbed-wire-covered hurdle festooned with hash cans, which the Amis presumably thought would serve to warn them of the enemy's presence. With Schwarz and Matz covering the grating up above, they slipped by and continued their stumbling nightmare progress.

The sewerage started to thin out again. The air became clearer. Von Dodenburg shook his head violently. The thick sand at the back of his eyeballs seemed to vanish. Holding each other's hands like children in a nursery school, they pushed on in the gloom, following the ancient civilian. And then suddenly a shaft of light shone down upon them. They halted, hearts beating like trip-hammers.

'It's them,' a voice shouted. In German! Von Dodenburg felt his knees almost give way with relief.

Gasping, panting, sobbing, they started to climb up the makeshift wooden ladder lowered to them. They had reached the first German outpost. Filthy, exhausted, trembling with fatigue and shock, they emerged into the beam of the torch, to the cries of disgust of their rescuers.

'Ugh,' an unknown voice, called, 'give them room! … Make way for the shit shovellers!'

Despite his exhaustion, von Dodenburg grinned. They had made it.

CHAPTER 21

Dawn came slowly, as if it were reluctant to throw its light on the stark, sobering tableau of the wrecked city. Once magnificent trees, stripped of their foliage by the ceaseless artillery fire, now looked like gaunt outsize toothpicks. Jagged chunks of brickwork and twisted steel rods that had once been fine houses. The mutilated carcass of an Opel truck that had struck a mine and had slumped to a dying stop like a live thing. And everywhere discarded equipment, American and German gas masks, ripped overcoats, empty cans, helmet-liners, broken rifles. One of the GIs waiting to move out kicked a bloody shoe that lay among the mess of war and shuddered to see that it still contained a foot.

At seven-thirty, the big guns started to thunder. The mobile 155s fired their sixty-pound shells at point-blank range. The shattered buildings which made up the confused German front line shuddered like ships striking heavy seas every time the great shells hit them.

'Cigarettes out!' an officer ordered.

The infantry took a hurried last draw, then they stubbed out their cigarettes.

'Form up!'

They moved forward too slowly for the top kick, who had been a corporal the week before, and he snarled, 'Didn't you guys hear the major? Now get the goddam lead out of your tails! Form up!'

They scrambled into position.

At eight o'clock precisely the barrage stopped. The officers blew their whistles. Like an unruly accordion, the lead columns moved out, slithering, stumbling, falling one moment and picking themselves up the next, as they advanced into the chaos of the ruins. Ahead, the German MG 42s commenced their bitter old song of death. Colonel Seitz's 26th Infantry was going in for the final assault.

Seitz was attacking on a different pattern for this assault. He had divided his regiment into small assault teams, each team covered by a Sherman or tank destroyer wherever possible. While the armoured vehicle covered the assault team, forcing the Kraut defenders into the cellar by its fire, they would rush the building and start clearing it out from the roof

downwards.

Seitz realised that this meant it would be difficult to maintain contact between the assault teams – indeed the new pattern would make it very easy for the Krauts to infiltrate between them in the confused fighting among the ruins. To avoid this, his staff officers had worked out a series of check points based on street intersections and prominent buildings. No outfit could advance beyond these check points until it had established contact with its adjacent unit. Each rifle company was assigned a specific zone of advance to avoid confusion and each company commander, in his turn, assigned a street to each platoon. Thus the old city was divided into a series of interlinking squares which would have to be cleared out systematically before the next ones could be tackled.

But Seitz was still worried by the town's sewer system, especially after the surprise attack on his rear echelon had thrown his whole first push off its stride. He ordered that each sewer and cellar be located, however costly it was in time, and blocked off. But how? In the end one of his staff officers came up with a solution. Just across the border at the little Belgian town of St Vith he had discovered a factory turning out liquid cement. Immediately Seitz had General Collins order that its entire production be turned over to military use so that the cement could be poured down each new sewer opening and allowed to harden under armed guard until it presented an effective barrier against any Kraut trying to jump the advancing infantry from the rear.

As for the civilians crowding the cellars of the front-line area, they were not going to receive any kid glove treatment. Watching the first troops move out, one of Seitz's officers was approached by a hesitant private.

'Pardon me, sir, I can't find my officer,' the young GI said. 'And we've found some civvies in that house over there. We'd like to know what to do with them?'

The major stepped over the dead German, whose dusty boots were sticking into the street from the doorway in which he lay, and looked at the soldier. 'If you can spare a guard to send them back to the civilian cage, okay. If you can't, shoot them in the back! That's what we always did in my old outfit. Don't take no nonsense from them, boy.'

The 26th was taking no chances whatsoever this time, even if they had to commit mass murder to take the damn city.

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By now Donner had transformed what was left of his command into a mass of barbed-wire entanglements, overturned tramcars and trucks, linked together with sandbags as barricades. The shattered houses had been joined together by interlinking tunnels, slits blown into their walls for machine-guns and heavy artillery. Disabled Tiger tanks had been buried into the rubble with only their heavy gun turrets visible. Mines had been strung across all the main approach roads and the rubble in front of the German positions was littered with deadly little butterfly anti-personnel mines.

The city's remaining flak had been pressed into service as field guns and each major street was covered by 88 and 20-MM flak cannons, manned by sixteen-year-old volunteers from the Hitler Youth and grey-uniformed girl 'flak helpers'. And everywhere behind the line Gestapo man 'Pistol Paul' and his gang, plus a handful of middle-aged chain-dogs, kept watch lest there were any weakening in the troops' National Socialist fervour.

That afternoon, the battle for Aachen became a battle for a shoe factory, the Technical University, a block of offices, and the main police station. At the shoe factory, the 26th made a serious mistake. It attacked in the basement and started working its way upwards. By the time the GIs had cleared the first floor, their enemy had burrowed back into the basement again. Once that force had been dealt with, the defenders of the second floor had destroyed the staircases leading upwards. Then they cut holes in the floor and started dropping grenades on the frustrated GIs below.

In the end two staff sergeants scaled the outside of the building, pursued by angry bullets from snipers in other buildings and reached the flat roof in safety. There they knocked a hole in it, poured in petrol and started a flash fire by dropping in white phosphorus hand grenades. The surviving defenders came streaming out, hands raised high, screaming 'comrade' to be mown down as soon as they appeared at the shattered door.

That afternoon, as Colonel Seitz reported gloomily to Huebner, 'Our gains have been measured from attic to attic and from sewer to sewer.'

Huebner remained firm. Before he slammed down the phone in poorly concealed anger, he snapped, 'I want those goddam hills. You'd better get them for me – or you'd better not come back from this push!'

Donner was still worried by the strength and determination of the Ami attack. That evening he ordered von Dodenburg and the two hundred odd survivors of Battle Group Wotan to launch an all-out drive to stop the

Americans' attack along the axis of the Wilhelmstrasse, drawing ever closer to the vital heights.

The German bombardment caught the Americans off guard just before their supper. It lasted only fifteen minutes, but the point-blank fire of the multiple 20-MM flak guns, manned by boys and girls, shattered the GIs' nerves. Some broke down and cried. Others vomited the first bites of food and had to be ordered to eat by their officers. Some buried themselves at the bottoms of shell holes, hugging the mud. The battalion commander himself fled into his command post, ignoring the hectic activity all around him, sobbing softly, his haggard unshaven face in his hands.

For a while there was a heavy brooding silence. The officers and NCOs began to rally their nervous men. Here and there, the men finished their hasty meals and started to mount guard in the foxholes.

Suddenly there was a single burst of Schmeisser fire. Someone screamed. The GIs tensed. But no enemy infantry came scurrying out of the ruins, firing as they ran. Instead the mobile flak wagons moved up another fifty yards and with complete disregard for their own safety started plastering the American positions with a blistering hail of 20-MM shells from their air-cooled quadruple cannon. A sergeant tried to tackle one of the flak wagons with a bazooka. He didn't get ten yards. A blast of ten shells hit him immediately. The GIs could stand it no more. Panic-stricken, their faces white and ugly with fear, the lead company broke, throwing away their rifles and equipment, in their haste to escape that withering fire.

Behind them the commander of the rear company lost his nerve. Firing his carbine wildly into the air, he yelled, 'save yourselves... to the rear... save yourselves!'

The second company joined the rest in their fear-ridden rush to the rear. The battalion commander tried to stop them, as they came running down the Wilhelmstrasse, trying to out-race the 20-mm shells, pushing and shoving each other in their frantic efforts to escape. But it was no use. Stricken with terror they trampled over the seriously wounded men lying on the bloody cobbles screaming for help. The commander was furious when they simply ran by him, thrusting aside his importuning hold. Even when he drew his forty-five and threatened to shoot, they took no notice.

'They're completely demoralised, sir,' he confessed, broken-hearted, over the phone to Colonel Seitz. 'I've never seen anything like it in fifteen years in the infantry. There's no sense in fooling ourselves, sir. Those men are

not withdrawing – they're running away.'

At the other end of the line, Seitz turned to his pale staff officers, listening in awed silence. 'Charley?' he snapped, 'Get on to the goddam divisional reserve. I'm needing a new battalion commander. I'm sacking this guy – he's broken down completely.' But the shattered battalion commander never experienced the ignominy of being relieved of his command. At that same moment, von Dodenburg's mixed force of tankers and panzer grenadiers struck the retreating battalion's right flank with the dash of the great days of old. Screaming ferociously, the black-clad young fanatics crashed into the fleeing Amis. The battalion commander was shot where he sat sobbing at the phone. His staff were mown down around him. Pausing only to loot the dying bodies of their Lucky Strikes and Hershey chocolate bars, their killers swept up the cellar steps, firing and stuffing the precious chocolate in their mouths as they went.

Here and there, groups of Ami NCOs and officers tried unsuccessfully to stop the surprise German attack. Howling like wild animals, the men of Wotan simply swept them aside. Slashing, stabbing, gouging, firing, they broke up Seitz's lead battalion mercilessly, leaving behind them a trail of dead and dying Americans. It seemed that nothing could stop them. Two hundred metres, five hundred metres, seven hundred.

'Christ on a crutch,' Matz gasped, limping red-faced and panting at von Dodenburg's side, his belt full of stick grenades, 'if this goes on, we'll have the buggers running for the Channel soon!'

But Seitz reacted quicker than Donner had anticipated. He flung his mobile 155mms into a stop line, risking the great guns without the protection of infantry. At the same time, he appealed to the Ninth TAC for help.

'God, General,' he pleaded with the Air Force Commander, 'I need air – and I need it now!'

'But what about your own doughs? I don't want another unfortunate incident, Colonel. You remember that business with Hobbs's Thirtieth?' The General cleared his throat. 'Can't risk that.'

'I don't give a twopenny damn about the doughs!' Seitz screamed into the phone. 'I must stop those goddam Krauts –whatever the cost. Now what about that air?'

He got it. The wild drive ran into the terrible fire of the 155s at two hundred metres range. Here and there small groups of crazed young men tried to tackle the self-propelled guns with their panzerfausts. But once the Ami

Lightnings came barrelling in at roof-top height, spraying the area with white-hot tracer, they too hit the ground and buried desperately into rubble, out of the murderous fire.

Von Dodenburg's sudden counter-attack had been an unqualified success. He had wiped out an entire Ami battalion and stopped the main enemy drive for yet another precious day. But the cost had been prohibitive, thanks to American domination of the air. Only one hundred of the desperate young men whom he had led into the attack limped back into the littered courtyard of the Hotel Quellenhof. His casualties had been fifty per cent. Battle Group Wotan would not attack again.

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As the Americans continued their attack, morale inside the garrison started to sag. That same night, the Luftwaffe tried to supply the trapped men by parachute. But not one of the 'Auntie Jus' reached their objective. A whole Ami anti-aircraft brigade had taken up positions around the city. They put up such a barrage with their 3.7-inch guns that the handful of ponderous three-engined planes that survived the fire turned and fled the way they had come.

Early next morning, the airfield at Cologne tried again. Just after dawn great black Do 242 gliders hissed silently over the American lines and came down to a crash-landing high on the Wilhelmstrasse, their skids bound with barbed wire to shorten their landing, flaps straight down. They crashed and braked to a halt in a cloud of dust, their wings ripped off here and there by the lamp posts. Their young pilots, the cream of Student's First Parachute Army, sprang triumphantly from their cockpits and crashed open the gliders' canvas doors to be met by a hail of machine-gun fire. They had landed in the midst of one of the Big Red One's recce outfits. A few minutes later the excited GIs were running over the pilots' bodies sprawled extravagantly in the dust to loot the stricken birds.

Another miserable day passed with Donner's perimeter shrinking more and more. Behind the line the rear-echelon stallions slouched around, bent-shouldered, filthy and louse-ridden, their sunken eyes staring out fixedly from grey unshaven faces. In the line, the defenders crouched in the rubble, blinking all the time to keep their weary, blood-shot eyes open, only firing when fired upon, too exhausted to shoot at the enemy even when he exposed himself carelessly.

The Amis made steady progress round behind the perimeter, eating their way ever closer to the first of the three vital heights. That afternoon the first of the hills surrendered (in spite of Donner's express command that the one-hundred-man garrison should fight to the 'last round and the last man'.) Pistol Paul, who had been sent up there to stiffen their morale, put one of his famed pistols carefully inside his gold-toothed mouth, gagged at the oily taste of the barrel and pressed the trigger. To the last, his aim was excellent. When the American intelligence team found him, with the help of some of their new prisoners, the back of his head had been blasted away and he bled to death on the ground in front of their boots, unable to answer any of their urgent questions.

Pistol Paul's suicide unnerved the rest of the Gestapo men. They went to plead with the Bishop of Aachen to save them, maintaining that they were non-combatants, civilian policemen at the most, whom he ought to give a certificate – any kind of certificate – to give the Amis when they captured the city.

The once despised Bishop looked at their craven faces in contempt. 'But I'm only a mere – pope, to use your old phrase,' he told them, between the ever new salvoes from the American 155s. 'What good would a certificate from me be?'

The heavy-set Gestapo men, who had reigned with club and thumbscrew these last eleven years, their faces shaking with fear, almost went down on their knees in the rubble of the Bishop's dining-room. But he remained firm and in the end they shuffled out in their ankle-length leather coats, defeated. One hour after Donner had been told of the incident by his own private information service, the five Gestapo men had been sentenced and strung up as a warning to the rest by their former companions of the Field Gendarmerie.

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Still the rot went on. During the night of the 19th, the garrison of the big bunker at the end of the Lousbergstrasse slipped out under their officers, after being battered by 155 cannon all day, and surrendered to the Amis. In Lousbergstrasse, the civilians came up from their cellars, blinking in the sudden light, and cheered the advancing Americans as if they were liberators, not conquerors.

More and more staggered into the smoke-filled street, as the GIs crept cautiously up each side, weapons gripped firmly in their hands. Ragged, filthy, sucking in the first fresh air they had breathed for days, the civilians screamed, 'Why didn't you come earlier? Why did you wait so long to get rid of Devil Donner? He's killed our children, ruined our homes, starved us.'

'Aaw,' a red-faced master-sergeant growled, pushing aside a distraught woman, who was screaming directly into his face, 'go and piss up yer sleeve, lady!'

His platoon commander, a weary young man in steel-rimmed GI glasses, who had the look of a school teacher about him, flashed a warning glance at the master-sergeant and said in poor German, 'We are glad to be here... to have freed you from the Nazis –'

He ducked rapidly, as a sniper's slug hit the brickwork a couple of feet from his head. 'Get that Kraut bastard!' he yelled.

CHAPTER 22

Von Dodenburg's redhead opened the door of the cellar, knowing that the hammering with the rifle-butts would change to something more drastic if she didn't. Two Ami soldiers stood there: one tall and thin, unshaven and covered in mud, a carbine clasped in his hand; the other fat, undersized and Italian-looking, the spirit from the looted bottle of Korn stuck in his blouse dribbling down his dark chin.

For a long moment, the two of them gazed at her speechlessly. Even in her dust-covered shapeless dress, there was no denying the magnificence of her breasts, proud and upright despite months of near starvation.

The fat soldier whistled thinly through his teeth, 'Jeez, Al, get an eyeful of them tits. Wow, is she stacked!' He thrust a hairy hand into his pocket and brought out a bar of ration chocolate. 'You sleep with me,' he said in bad German, leering at her knowingly, his dark eyes flickering back and forth from her breasts to her deathly pale face, 'I give chocolate – one, perhaps two.' He held the bar under her nose in what he imagined was a tempting manner.

'What about me?' the taller man asked, not taking his hard blue eyes off the redhead.

'Cos I'm more handsome, you get seconds,' the Italian-looking soldier said, his voice suddenly thick with lust. 'Come on, baby, let's make some beautiful music together. We ain't got all day, you know. There's a war on.' He edged closer to her, still holding the chocolate in front of her nose. She backed away fearfully. The two of them came after her. Al kicked the door closed with the back of his heel.

'What do you want?' she asked tremulously.

'What do you think, baby,' the smaller soldier asked scornfully. To jig-jig, you Kraut bitch!' He thrust out a hand to grab her breasts. She avoided his grasp and backed closer to the couch.

'Aw, quit the fooling, Benny,' the big soldier said, without taking his cold eyes off her face. 'Get on with it. What the hell are you waiting for?'

'I tell ya, she's got a hot body for me, Al,' he said and took a swig of the fiery schnapps. 'Okay, baby,' he gasped. 'You heard what my buddy Al said – we ain't got all the time in the world.'

Benny lunged at her. She felt his hand clutch the cloth of her dress. She pulled backwards. The cloth gave with a rip. Benny was left there, holding the front of her dress. Her hands flew up to protect her suddenly naked breasts. Al's hard eyes rested on them greedily for a moment.

'Get the hell out of my way, Benny!' he yelled and thrust the other soldier aside with one sweep of his big fist. With the other he grabbed at her dress and pulled with all his strength.

'Hot shit!' Benny breathed. 'She ain't got no drawers on.'

Al thrust out his big hand again. The redhead groaned with pain and tumbled over the back of the couch, her legs in the air. 'Grab her arms, you stupid little wop!' he ordered, breathing hoarsely, his hard face suddenly aflame. Benny dropped his bottle and grabbed the struggling red-head's arms.

'No,' she screamed, 'please – no!'

The two soldiers ignored her. While Benny held her, Al grabbed frantically at his belt. He dropped his mud-stained slacks. Swiftly he ripped away his khaki-coloured undershorts. 'Okay, baby,' he gasped, 'I'm gonna get you now. Try this one on for size, you Kraut son-of-a-bitch.'

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Slowly and painfully she reached for her father's razor, feeling as if every bone in her body were broken. As she did so, she caught a glimpse of her bruised, swollen face in the little flyblown mirror. She looked away and slumped back on the stained couch. A long time passed while she thought of what the two soldiers had done to her. She flicked open the old-fashioned cut-throat razor and gazed at it lovingly. Outside the guns had started again, but her whole attention was focused on the little blade which gleamed in the flickering light of the candle. After a while she tested it with the wetted tip of her thumb, the way she had seen her father do it as a child. It was all right. Very sharp.

The cellar began to rock under the barrage. Letting out her pent-up breath, she drew the gleaming blade across her left wrist. The pain was virtually non-existent. For a moment nothing happened. She gazed disappointedly down at her blue-veined wrist. Then there was a faint reddening of the cut. She licked her parched lips. Blood started to well up all along the line, slowly but surely. Thick bright red blood. She watched it fascinated. Suddenly the hollow of her hand was full of blood. She wiped it

on the stained blanket and quickly slashed the other wrist. This time she whimpered with the pain. The blood spurted out, showering her bruised knees a bright red.

With a sigh of luxurious relief she sank back on the couch and closed her eyes. As the blood drained out of her, filled the couch and began to drip on the soaked Hershey bar beneath it, she felt happy. It was all over at long last.

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Matz crunched his way across the broken glass of the hospital and flung open the door of Schulze's room. In the same instant, he lifted up his wooden leg and let loose an enormous fart of welcome.

'Hello, old horse,' he bellowed, ignoring the other two patients, crowded into the former broom cupboard, 'are you glad to see me?'

Schulze, his face pale and his wounded arm suspended above his head, made a mock gesture of choking. 'Great crap on the Christmas Tree, what do you want to do – gas me as well, you perverted banana-sucker?'

Matz ignored the comment. He plumped himself down on the cot. 'Where are the whores?' he asked, thrusting back his helmet, 'I fancy a bit of the other tonight. It's all right for you wounded blokes, lying here like broad-arsed sows, having a go at the five-fingered widow beneath the blankets, while us lot are fighting for you at the front.' He paused for breath and nodded at the two still figures crowded into the other cots in the tiny, airless room. 'Who're they?'

Schulze shrugged. 'Don't know. Lung and gut, I call 'em. The one on the right is lung-shot – the one on the left gut-shot. The bone-menders say they'll croak within the next twenty-four hours.'

'Tough tittie,' Matz sniffed and took his eyes off the still bandaged figures. 'What about you? Are they going to pension you off, or when do you start looking at the potatoes from low?'

'No such luck,' Schulze grumbled. 'That butcher Diedenhof said I'll be fit for light duties again in a couple of weeks. You ought to have done a better job with that shitty sabre of yours. I might have ended up as a one-armed doorman in the Herbertstrasse, Hamburg's red light district.'

'Yeah,' Matz drawled, 'and you'd be more upstairs dancing the mattress polka than downstairs doing your duty.'

Lung moaned. 'Aw shut up, you stupid bastard,' Schulze cried unsympathetically. 'Hey, Matz, where's the sauce? Don't tell me you came to visit me without any sauce?'

'The sister told me you weren't to have any booze.'

Schulze stuck up a thick thumb. 'The sister can sit her fat arse on that for all I care – where's the sauce?'

Matz reached in his battle-stained black tunic, heavy with the decorations of five years of war, and pulled out a little medicine bottle of clear liquid. 'Potato schnapps. Cost a can of Old Man from one of those arseholes of kitchen bulls at the Quellenhof. It's a good gargle though. They say it'll blow the back of yer head off.'

'Give it here,' Schulze said greedily, reaching out a big paw. 'I haven't wet my tonsils for months.' He pulled the cork out with his teeth, spat it on to Gut's bed and took a great swallow of the home-brewed spirit. 'Christ on a crutch!' he breathed, gasping for breath, 'that stuff'll take the lining off'n a lead coffin! But it's good.'

He took another tremendous pull at the little bottle, before Matz pulled it way from him, crying, 'Go easy, Schulze. Don't down it all by yourself. That's the last bottle of shitting schnapps in the whole shitting Wotan!'

Schulze wiped the back of his free hand across his big generous mouth and looked hard at Matz. 'Things are bad, eh?' he queried. Matz nodded. 'Watch in the piss-pot, syphilis in the heart,' he said gloomily, using the old soldiers' despondent phrase. 'Shitting awful, if you ask me. The line won't last another forty-eight hours.'

'Wotan? The Old Man?'

'We're down to about one hundred and fifty effectives who can hold a weapon, and most of them are in a piss-poor state. The CO – he's all right. But he's like the rest of us, out on his sodding feet.'

Matz breathed out wearily and Schulze could see, despite the banter, just how worn the one-legged NCO was. 'Thank God, old Devil Donner has pulled us out of the line as his last reserve. Otherwise we'd have had the chop yesterday.' He passed the bottle back to Schulze. 'Go on, mate, you'd better have the rest of the sauce – it's probably the last of the stuff that either of us will see.'

'You are a happy little ray of sunshine,' Schulze growled and took the bottle. He finished it in a gulp and flung the empty onto Lung's unprotesting lap.

'All right,' he said, 'get out that damn sabre of yours!'

'Eh?' Matz said incredulously.

'You heard! Or have you been eating big beans again? Get it out and cut me free.'

'Cut you free?'

'What's up with you, Matz? Getting long in the tooth or something? Cut me out of this shitting gadget before the nurses come in. I'm going back to the Wotan.'

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'All right,' Schwarz cried, his voice cracked with exhaustion, 'this is the panzerfaust. All of you take it in your right hand and place it on your right shoulder.'

Obediently the Hitler Youth boys took up their bazookas, their childish faces set and determined.

'God in flaming heaven!' Schulze breathed as they passed through the Quellenhof's battle-littered courtyard, 'they're nothing else but shitting kids, still wet behind the ears.'

'That's all we've got left,' Matz explained, keeping pace with him, as Schwarz showed the handful of boys how to load the single-shot anti-tank weapon. 'There's a whole company of them holding the line in our place. Fifty casualties they had yesterday alone.'

Schulze shook his head, but said nothing. Together they trudged up the stairs, passed a group of clerks man-handling the pieces of a 20-MM flak cannon to the second floor. 'Mind you don't rupture yourselves,' Schulze said, contemptuous of the office workers confronted with the prospect of action at last. 'Hate to see you pen-pushers hurt yourselves.'

The frightened clerks, their shabby grey uniform jackets black with sweat under the armpits, did not answer.

'Unsociable buggers,' Schulze growled, biting his lip suddenly with the pain of his shoulder.

'You've got to excuse them, Schulze,' Matz explained. 'They're already creaming their knickers – and they've not even had a sniff of gunpowder yet.'

They marched the length of the second floor. Everywhere Donner's staff – officers and men – were preparing the place for the coming siege, smashing what glass was left in the windows, lugging sandbags back and

forth, setting up machine-gun posts, placing fire-buckets of sand at strategic places, spraying the ceiling with water from stirrup pumps to lower the danger of fire and the choking dust, once the artillery bombardment started hitting the HQ from the newly captured hills.

Schulze pointed to a red-faced, gross paymaster in his shirtsleeves, hauling cases of 20-mm ammunition into position. 'Does my heart good to see rear-line stallions like that working, especially those broad-arsed paymasters. Owe me a packet those bastards do.'

'Well, don't worry about trying to collect it now, Schulze,' Matz grunted. 'Because where we're going, once the balloon goes up, we won't be needing any money – just bits of wood to keep the shitty fire going.'

Schulze laughed grimly. Together they limped on.

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'Well, as I live and breathe,' Colonel von Dodenburg breathed, as they entered the weapon-littered room and snapped to attention as if they were back at Sennelager and not in the middle of a battlefield, 'Sergeant-Major Schulze!' His tired face broke into smile. 'Stand at ease, both of you.' He stretched out his hand. 'Good to see you again, you waterfront rascal!' They shook hands. 'How's the arm?'

Schulze shrugged then wished he hadn't. 'The wing, sir? A little fish. No problem whatsoever. But I doubt if I'll ever lift two hundredweight of flour at the docks again.'

'You probably never did anyway. But you'll get a pension from a grateful Fatherland in due course, never fear.'

'I'd rather have a one-way ticket to South America, sir, especially at this moment.'

Von Dodenburg sat down heavily and indicated they should seat themselves on the case of 7.92x57mm Schmeisser ammunition. 'I know what you mean, Schulze. I think we'd all like one of those tickets at the moment.'

'How is the situation, sir?' Schulze asked, examining the CO's pale, exhausted face.

'In a word, Schulze – shitty.'

'And the drill?'

'That's a question only the Gods can answer – and naturally, the supreme god of all – SS Police General Donner...'

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On the afternoon of October 10th, Devil Donner answered that particular question. A runner, gasping with the strain of covering the terrible, shell-swept three hundred metres that now separated the Quellenhof from the front line, stumbled into von Dodenburg's CP in the cellar of a wrecked store and panted, 'Sir, you're wanted immediately at General Donner's HQ.' He sat down abruptly on the nearest ammunition crate and gasped, 'Watch how you go, sir – there's all hell loose up there.'

When von Dodenburg, followed by Matz and a red-faced gasping Schulze, had safely crossed the main road leading to the Quellenhof and were out of the direct fire of the Ami cannon located on the three heights, he saw what the young runner meant. A hysterical mob of dirty civilians and what were obviously deserters from the line filled the streets, screaming and gesticulating. Roughly they pushed their way through them and the mob gave way reluctantly. They turned a corner. Another crowd was dragging a fat naked man along on a wheelbarrow. His hands were tied behind his back and there was a large placard hung round his neck. On it, in crude black letters, was written: 'NAZI SWINE.' A fat-breasted woman in a dirty flowered apron came up from one of the cellars and threw the contents of a chamber pot in the former official's face.

'Fat bastard!' the woman cried. 'Now we'll settle with you lot at last!'

Matz raised his machine-pistol angrily, but von Dodenburg knocked down the muzzle, and shook his head. A little farther on two ragged men with the yellow letters EAST painted on the backs of their jackets, indicating they were slave labourers recruited in the territories once occupied by the Germans there, were busy burrowing into the basement of a wrecked house, obviously looking for something to loot. Again Matz looked at the CO inquiringly, and again von Dodenburg shook his head.

The CO simply said, 'Too late now.'

And Schulze, bringing up the rear, knew what he meant. The defence of Aachen had virtually collapsed. Now it was every man for himself. As they turned into the entrance to the Quellenhof, avoiding the huge new shell-craters everywhere, the mob had begun burning swastika flags behind them.

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Donner was standing looking out of the glassless window in exactly the same position as when von Dodenburg had first met him, in what seemed another age. Slowly, he turned, a cynical smile on his ruined face. 'I believe they call it rats leaving the sinking ship, eh, von Dodenburg,' he said wearily and slumped in his chair, indicating that the young officer should sit too.

'You mean –'

'Yes, that mob out there.' He took out his eye and cleaned it. 'I've seen it all before. In 1918 when the civilians stabbed the fighting army in the back. Suddenly they were all democrats, had never wanted war, had been forced to fight.' He put back his eye absently. '*Canaille!*'

There was a sudden silence, broken only by the persistent thunder of the Ami guns and the rattle of the horse-drawn ambulances, bringing ever new casualties to the eleven surgeons working in the hotel's cellar, their rubber aprons and boots awash with blood.

Donner was finished, von Dodenburg could see that. His one eye was sunk deep in his skull, which was not unlike the silver death's head badge adorning his collar, and a nerve twitched uncontrollably on the good side of his ruined face. The seconds passed leadenly. Then suddenly, Donner pushed a piece of paper lying on his dust-covered desk towards von Dodenburg.

'A blitz. Top priority,' he said tonelessly. 'Came in from the Führer's Headquarters thirty minutes ago.'

'Should I read it, sir?' von Dodenburg asked. A blitz was usually reserved for general officers only.

Donner nodded wearily. 'Yes, it concerns Wotan.'

Von Dodenburg picked it up and read:

> Immediate and urgent.
> By officer only!
> To SS and Police General Degenhardt Donner. Order immediate withdrawal of Battle Group SS Wotan, commander Col. von Dodenburg, from Aachen front. Rejoin 1st SS Division Adolf Hitler Bodyguard in Führer Reserve at once.
>
> Signed Jodl (Col. General).

Von Dodenburg felt a sudden surge of hope at this opportunity to get out of the Aachen death trap, yet also an unpleasant sensation of running out on

Donner, whom he had come to like and admire over these last terrible weeks.

He put the blitz down carefully and asked, 'What does it mean, sir?'

'I don't think one needs a lawyer to interpret it, von Dodenburg. Your ruffians of the Wotan are probably going to escape the Aachen debacle with a whole skin. That sly bastard of a Colonel General Jodl obviously wants you for some glorious new venture – and Jodl is impatient of delay. You are to go – and go at once.'

'And Aachen, sir?'

Donner did not answer at once. Below, some boy or other – perhaps one of the Hitler Youth – was screaming for his mother as they carried him into the operating theatre. He shrugged. 'Aachen is a matter of history now. It will last a few hours at the most. Your Wotan won't make any difference.'

Vainly, von Dodenburg tried to find the words to express his emotions. 'But we can't go just like that, General – why, I've lost nearly a thousand men from my Wotan here. I can't...' His voice trailed away, as he saw that the man opposite was not really listening to him any more.

Donner nodded, as if the young officer had just made some casual remark about the state of the weather. 'I shall be glad to stay here and die,' he said. 'All these years – the struggle for power in the twenties, the rebirth of Germany in the thirties, the war –' he flung out his blackened claw of a hand wearily. 'All to end like this, with the mob fighting in the streets of Germany's most holy city – a German mob.' He looked directly at von Dodenburg. 'It was all for nothing – all that effort, all that sacrifice, all that blood!'

'But we can't give up, sir!' von Dodenburg protested with what energy he had left.

'One can – one can,' Donner said, rising stiffly to his feet and walking over to the shattered window once more. With his back to von Dodenburg, his face hollowed out even more by the ruddy light of the flames below, he said slowly, 'There was an Austrian – a Jew to boot, if I am not mistaken – who wrote a long time ago, “In the time of the sinking sun, dwarfs cast shadows like giants.” The sun is going down, von Dodenburg, and I do not want to live in the time of the dwarfs.' He turned and thrust out his good hand. 'My dear von Dodenburg, as one war criminal,' he chuckled throatily, 'to another, may I wish you the best of luck.'

Stiffly von Dodenburg took the hand. It was icy cold, as if its owner were already dead. 'Thank you, sir.' He hesitated. 'And what will you do,

General?'

Donner clapped his crippled claw of a hand on his pistol holster. The soldier's way out, von Dodenburg.' He straightened up into the position of attention. 'Colonel von Dodenburg, goodbye. And Heil Hitler!'

Von Dodenburg clicked his heels together and flung up his right arm in salute. 'Thank you, sir. Heil Hitler!'

Devil Donner's eye gleamed. Then he bent his head in his hands; von Dodenburg was forgotten already. It was all over now.

CHAPTER 23

'There's no way out, sir,' the young officer said hopelessly and slumped on the ration case, his face and uniform white with dust from the rubble. With a sigh of relief at getting back alive, he let his machine-pistol clatter to the floor. Von Dodenburg could see he was exhausted from the reconnaissance mission.

'Bring him a cup of black sweat, Schulze,' he ordered.

The big NCO nodded and with his good hand poured the officer out a cup of ersatz coffee from the big enamel bucket kept permanently boiling in the corner. Lieutenant Kleinbier, who had carried out a personal recce to try to find an escape route to the north or east, cradled the red-hot canteen cup gratefully between his two hands and sipped at the bitter black fluid.

Von Dodenburg gave him a few minutes. Outside, only a hundred metres away from their cellar, an Ami 3-inch mortar opened up. The cellar shuddered. Plaster started to drift from the ceiling like snow. 'All right, Kleinbier,' von Dodenburg said firmly above the roar, 'let me have your report, please.'

The young officer pulled himself together. 'Naturally sir, the observation posts on the three heights have got the whole area to our front covered, except when the gun smoke gives us some protection. During daylight hours, we haven't got a hope in hell of getting out unobserved. In addition, they're massing between the Wingertsberg and the Salvatorberg. I couldn't get too close, but I could hear the rattle of tracked vehicles and they're laying down a smoke screen. So it's pretty clear what they're up to there.'

'And the sewers?' von Dodenburg interjected harshly, wishing the young officer would get to the point, for time was running out.

'Blocked and filled permanently with some sort of gas,' he said despondently, letting the empty canteen dangle down between his mud-stained knees. 'For what my opinion is worth, sir, I think we've had it – there's no way out.'

Schwarz looked as if he were going to protest. But von Dodenburg shook his head. Kleinbier was like most of his men – absolutely exhausted, out on his feet, kept going simply by the Wotan spirit, living off nervous

energy. He bent over the bloodstained map of his position. His force had been crowded into an area of two hundred square metres of ruins and rubble set along a line of what had once been the Monheimsallee behind the Quellenhof. On both sides the Amis were crowding in on him down the Krefeld and Jülich strassen. It was obvious that the Amis pushing up from the rear via the Peterstrasse would coordinate their attack, with the final push coming from between the two heights. It was obvious too that it would be only a matter of hours before that final push came. Probably at dawn, he told himself; the Ami generals were not very imaginative about the time of their attacks. They always seemed to stick to the old dawn routine.

He stared at the map while the others crowded in the tight, candlelit cellar, watched him tensely, wondering how their CO was going to get them out of the trap. There must be a way out, he told himself. There had to be – over one hundred and fifty men's lives depended upon it!

Suddenly he remembered what his old tactics teacher had told them at the SS Officer Academy at Bad Tolz before the war: 'When faced with an impossible situation, gentlemen, there is only one way out – to disappear up your own arsehole – somewhat smartly! You don't just wait on your fat bottoms for the enemy to attack. How do you do it? You attack into the centre of the enemy's attack force and, if you're lucky, disappear before he can recover. The disadvantage – you hit the full weight of the enemy. The advantage – you catch him with his knickers down.'

Thus, the long-dead Major von Arnheim. But how did one apply his 'disappearing arsehole tactic', as he had called it to the present desperate situation? How? Von Dodenburg racked his brains, while the cellar rocked to the Ami fire.

'Kleinbier,' he broke his silence, 'come over here and look at the map. Here.' He pointed to the green shaded area to the right of the Wingertsberg near the Julichstrasse, which he estimated would be the extreme left flank of the coming Anti attack. 'What did you see there?'

The young officer's face, which had brightened when von Dodenburg had called him, fell again. 'No good, sir –'

'I'm not asking your opinion, Kleinbier,' von Dodenburg snapped angrily, 'just what you saw.'

'Sorry, sir, a minefield, sir, one of our own, which has fallen into the enemy's hands. It's covered by machine-gun nests –here, here and here.'

'Infantry?'

'Nothing to speak of. But the Amis don't need stubble hoppers out there. They have the mines and the machine-guns on fixed lines of fire. They wouldn't expect...' Kleinbier's voice trailed away, for von Dodenburg was no longer listening. He had found the arsehole he had been looking for.

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The final barrage was tremendous. It had been going on unceasingly since midnight. Now to their right, where the Quellenhof lay, the sky was a dull red so that everything to their front stood out starkly. Von Dodenburg looked at the dark outlines of the wounded who had volunteered to stay behind to man the machine-guns so that the Amis would not suspect that they were abandoning their positions.

'Thank you, lads,' he whispered, 'and the best of luck!'

'You, too, sir,' answered a corporal who had lost his right leg. 'Don't worry about us. We know that the Wotan'll come back.'

Von Dodenburg felt the hot tears blind him momentarily. 'Yes, yes,' he lied hastily, 'we'll be back, lads.'

A hand reached out and clasped his. Then they set off through the smoky gloom with the burnt grass brushing against their rag-muffled boots. To their right a slow Ami machine gun opened up. White tracer stitched the darkness. But the slugs went off into a southerly direction, way off them. A hundred metres they walked. Two hundred. Still no enemy reaction. Suddenly they heard the alarming chink of metal on metal. They dropped as one, hearts beating like trip-hammers, sweating forefingers curled round the triggers of their weapons. For a long time they crouched there, scarcely daring to breathe. Then Matz, up front with a small patrol, crawled towards them.

'All right, sir,' he whispered softly, 'Ami MG dug in about twenty metres to your right. My lads have got it covered. Just take it nice and easy and we'll get by it without trouble. The Amis look as if they've got their heads down for the night.'

The MG nest with its snoring Amis was behind them. They edged their way out of the grass into a shell-shattered wood, where the twigs cracked and snapped under the muffled boots like breakfast cereal and slapped at their faces viciously when the man in front forgot to keep hold. They passed a group of their own comrades, sprawled out in a heap, arms flung about in

careless abandon, the white hush of the tracer painting their dead faces in a ghastly hue. The men filing by their comrades killed in the final counter-attack carefully looked away, as if they did not want to be reminded that the same fate could well overtake them soon.

Suddenly von Dodenburg stiffened and held up his arm. 'Halt!' he hissed. Matz was barring his way, standing next to the familiar skull-and-crossbones sign with the frightening words written beneath it: 'ATTENTION – MINES!'

'We're here, sir,' Matz said unnecessarily.

'And the Ami MG nests?'

'As far as we can make out, sir, there's one immediately ahead of us, perhaps a hundred and fifty metres off, and one to the right there. Look, there it is!' Matz pointed to the sudden red blaze of muzzle fire, followed an instant later by the white Morse of tracer.

'Good. Thank you, Matz.' Von Dodenburg turned round. 'All right, take cover. The volunteers up here.'

As his soldiers dropped gratefully into the brush, the six men who had volunteered to clear the mines pushed through their comrades, bayonets at the ready. Von Dodenburg stripped off his equipment and handed it with his Schmeisser to Schulze.

'Hang on to that.'

'Be careful, sir,' Schulze said anxiously. 'If they're magnetic –' helplessly, he shrugged. 'Then good-night, Marie!'

'Don't be an old woman, Schulze,' von Dodenburg answered, with more assurance than he felt, 'All right, the rest of you follow me.'

Von Dodenburg clambered carefully over the rusty, twisted barbed wire which marked the start of the minefield and put his right foot gingerly to the ground. He pressed down, feeling the sweat spring up unpleasantly all over his body'. Nothing happened. He put his other foot down. Again nothing. Drawing a deep breath, he advanced six metres, counting them out carefully, so that the first two men clambering over the wire behind him could hear. He stopped. There were three of them on the wrong side of the wire now.

'All right,' he whispered, 'this is the drill. We'll advance with myself in the middle, prodding the ground at every half a metre. If you hit a P.2S, remember it could well be wired in relay. If it's a Teller, leave it.'

'And if it's a magnetic?' Kleinbier, one of the two leading volunteers,

asked the question von Dodenburg dreaded.

The CO licked his dry lips. 'Stop, move back and leave it to me. I'll have a go at it. I've got nothing metallic on me. I might have a chance of defusing it.' *Might*, a cynical little voice echoed within him. He ignored it by a sheer effort of will. 'All right,' he ordered, 'let's move out.'

Behind them the other four men waited to cross the wire. They would act as reserves and check the verges of the path cleared, just in case a mine had been overlooked.

Sweating like frightened pigs, hardly daring to breathe, each fresh step made only after what seemed an age of deliberation, they advanced in a six-metre-broad line, testing out the soft ground, pace by pace. For what appeared to be a long time, nothing happened. Von Dodenburg's heart began to react normally again. The sweat started to dry on his tense body. Then the man to his right froze.

'Mine,' he gasped. Behind them the reserves froze in the footsteps of the leaders.

Cautiously the volunteer who had discovered the prong of the mine protruding out of the earth, bent and began to sweep away the surface soil with the side of his hand. There was no sound save his harsh gasps as he probed the earth, the sweat pouring from his brow in streams.

'Teller,' he breathed in relief.

'Shit!' someone cursed, his voice a mixture of anger and relief. Teller anti-tank mines couldn't be activated by the light weight of a soldier. They pressed on a little faster now. They found another Teller mine, and another. Von Dodenburg could see that a pattern was emerging. Whoever had laid the mines facing towards the Ami position had apparently covered the last few metres with anti-tank mines. Would that mean they would soon bump into the anti-personnel ones? Five nerve-racking minutes later, Kleinbier stopped, whispered a hoarse warning and dropped to his knees. His hands moved rapidly.

'S-mine,' he whispered.

Von Dodenburg breathed out. The S-mine was easier to deal with than the P.2S and all his men had been trained to lay them and pick them up again. Hastily Kleinbier cleared away the soil from the surface of the little anti-personnel mine, filled with deadly steel balls which sprang out to waist height and had gained the name of 'debollocker' from the troops. Very carefully he ran his hand round its sides. Nothing. Slowly he slid his fingers underneath it

to check if there were a spring-triggered matchbox fuse lying there or a wire leading to another mine a few metres away.

'Anything?' von Dodenburg asked hoarsely.

'No,' Kleinbier answered, his voice equally hoarse. 'Thank God!'

Slowly they progressed through the minefield, with the reserves playing out white tapes behind them within which the rest of the Wotan followed, tense and expectant, knowing that if the Amis spotted them now they were finished: helpless sitting ducks, crowded together in the narrow, mine-free lane driven through an open field, devoid of cover.

They bumped into a line of P.2Ss, wired in relay. They spent fifteen terrible minutes, while the volunteers took the mines apart bit by agonising bit, until they came to the thin glass detonator, which seemed to slip about in their sweaty fingers, as if it were covered in fine grease.

Von Dodenburg and another couple of men took over the lead while the original two slipped to the rear, their hands trembling. Now the whole western sky was a blood red hue. What was left of Aachen in German hands was burning. From their own section of the front, the machine-gun fire had ceased now. But they had no time to reflect on the fate of their wounded comrades; their own situation was too desperate.

Von Dodenburg stopped suddenly. A cold shudder of fear ran through him. His fingers had touched the glass dome of a magnetic mine! He opened his lips to utter a warning. No sound came. He licked them and swallowed hard.

'Magnetic,' he croaked, 'get back!'

The other two backed hurriedly. Behind them the advance came to a ragged halt.

'Take it easy, sir,' Schulze's voice floated forward urgently.

Praying that he had nothing metal on him still, von Dodenburg's fingers groped around the glass dome. 'As if you were up your beloved's knickers,' their instructor at mine school had explained the technique coarsely. It came up. Slowly... slowly, he began to turn it to the left. One slip and the whole thing would go up in his face.

The sweat was dripping from his brow now, almost blinding him. Hardly daring to breathe, he held on to the glass dome with his right hand. Carefully he reached out his left hand, his fingers trembling wildly, feeling as clumsy and as thick as pork sausages, and ran it around the mine. Nothing! Still holding on to the dome, he tried to force his hand underneath the mine.

He couldn't!

'Anything wrong, sir?' Kleinbier asked urgently.

'Aah, hold your water!' he snapped angrily, his nerves almost at breaking point now. He bent down so that his face touched the damp grass. With his teeth, he began to tear away tufts of it, pressing down on the edge of the mine with his chin. It started to move. The fingers of his left hand moved underneath it, seeking fearfully for other wires, booby traps, knowing now that if the mine went off it would blow his face apart. Millimetre by millimetre his fingers crept forward, meeting no opposition – no wire, no fuse-plug, no book-match fuse. Nothing.

For a moment he lay there, all energy drained out of him. Then he deliberately pulled himself together. With agonising slowness, he drew the mine out to reveal it in all its man-made ugliness. For a moment he longed to give it a great kick and send it flying. But there was no time for such outbursts of emotional relief. Carefully, he placed it to one side, as far as his arms would reach.

Spitting out earth and grass, he called sharply, 'Get that marker tape up here on the double, will you!'

The volunteers moved forward quickly.

'Kleinbier, get that mine out of the way!'

'Sir!'

Their snail-like progress began again while Kleinbier picked up the mine and let the hushed troopers slip by him, their eyes averted from the deadly little instrument.

The lieutenant laughed drily. 'Don't look like that, lads,' he said softly, 'It can't harm you now. It's just a ten-pound piece of useless scrap –'

Lieutenant Kleinbier, nineteen years of age, handsomely blond, with the body of a professional athlete who had never had a girl in all his life, suddenly erupted in a terrible violet burst of flame. The thick cramp came a fraction of a section later. His face shattered and he disintegrated. Blood, bone and flesh flew everywhere.

'Over there!' a frantic voice screamed in English. 'In the cruddy minefield!'

An American machine-gun started to chatter. Tracer cut the night wildly. Lead sprayed the minefield. Another MG joined from the right, its fire more accurate. A soldier behind von Dodenburg clapped his hand to his shoulder suddenly and went down screaming. Von Dodenburg came to life.

'Damn the mines,' he roared. 'Run for it!'

Completely unarmed, he began to pelt towards the Ami positions. The men hesitated. Before them lay twenty metres or so of uncleared minefield.

'Come on,' Schulze yelled angrily, 'Move, you dogs, do you want to live for ever?'

The cruel exhortation had its effect. They stumbled forward. Another mine exploded, scattering bodies everywhere. It didn't stop them. All around von Dodenburg, his men were stumbling, falling, sobbing with fear, as they pelted towards the flash of the MGs, which indicated both death and safety. A round Ami grenade hissed through the air towards him. He dodged like a startled horse. It went off behind him and flung him in a crater, lined with two of his men, heads hanging limp, their guts ripped open and spilled out. His hands were bathed to the wrists in the bloody mess. He sprang up, screaming, following his panic-stricken men.

An Ami helmet loomed up. Someone kicked the GI in the face. He reeled back screaming. The nearest MG swung round on them. A line of troopers were mown down.

'Don't leave me... please, don't leave me,' a frightened voice pleaded. PLEASE –' Then they were in the American line, kicking, slashing, stabbing, shooting in a crazed frenzy of fear and rage. It was all over in a matter of seconds. Nothing could stand up to that terrible attack. A minute later, the survivors had broken through and were running leaden-lunged towards the East and safety.

CHAPTER 24

At four o'clock on the morning of October 21st, while the survivors of the Wotan were fleeing eastwards behind the Ami lines, an event took place which indirectly saved them. A telephone call came from the Petit Trianon at Versailles, Eisenhower's new Supreme Headquarters, from his Chief of Staff: red-haired, ulcer-ridden Bedell Smith.

'Listen, Courtney,' he told Hodges, who had been awakened at his Spa HQ to take the call, 'sorry to get you up like this, but we've just heard here that Congress is considering Ike for his fifth star.'

General Hodges was awake immediately. 'His fifth!' he exclaimed. 'He'll be the first since Black Jack! – Er, General Pershing I mean.'

'Yeah,' Beatle said shortly, feeling his ulcers begin to act up again. 'Well, it'd look good if your doughs took Aachen – *as of now*.'

'Of course, Beatle,' Hodges agreed. 'I understand. Will do and say – give my regards to Ike.'

'Will do,' Beatle said drily, telling himself that even army commanders fought their battles these days with one eye over their shoulders looking at the publicity boys.

Hodges got on to Lightning Joe at once. 'I'm sorry to get you up, Joe', he apologised, as courteous as ever.

'You didn't, sir. I was up. We're attacking at dawn, sir, in the Aachen sector.'

'That's what I'm calling you about, Joe. I want you to get Clarence to release another regiment to Seitz – at once. I want Aachen taken – and I want it taken this morning.'

'We could do it with Seitz's 26th.'

'I'm not so sure, Joe. At all events, I want to be certain. Remember that the folks back home must be getting a little tired of this Aachen business. It's been going on for nearly two months now.'

Lightning Joe told the 'folks back home' what they could do with their opinions. But to the Commander of the First Army, he said, 'I understand. I'll see to it, sir.'

'Thank you, Joe.'

Within five minutes Hodges was back in bed on the second floor of

Spa's Hotel Britannique, where the Kaiser had once had his HQ in the old war when Hodges had been a humble infantry captain bogged down in the mud of France. In another five minutes he was fast asleep. But now the First Army's communications had started to hum. Hurried telephone calls were made. Dispatch riders sprang to their machines. Orders were rapped out. Tense, weary, frightened men were roused out of their billets. Trucks roared into life, filling the dawn with the stink of gasoline. Half-warmed hash cans were handed out hurriedly. The wheels began to roll.

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And in the confusion caused by the move of a whole infantry regiment into the 26th's sector, Colonel von Dodenburg and his handful of gasping survivors, bent, coughing and choking like a bunch of asthmatic old men, slipped through the ring held by the Big Red One and their comrades of Roosevelt's Butchers. Half an hour later they were moving cautiously down a tree-lined country road when a thin child's voice cried, 'Halt – who goes there?' Without waiting for an answer, their challenger fired. Matz gasped sharply and went down on one knee.

'What's up?' Schulze cried.

'The silly bastard shot me in the leg – my wooden one,' Matz cried angrily and tugged off the remains of his shattered stump, as a kid of perhaps sixteen appeared from behind a tree. He was clad in Hitler Youth uniform and carried a huge Lebel French rifle, dating from the turn of the century.

'What the hell did you do that for?' von Dodenburg cried. 'You're supposed to wait for an answer to the challenge before you act!'

'The corporal didn't tell me, sir,' the boy said, looking hangdog. 'And I thought you were the Amis.'

Von Dodenburg's anger gave way to relief. Playfully he clapped the boy about the neck and grinned. 'Remember it the next time – the Führer's short enough of soldiers as it is, without the Hitler Youth killing them. Now, where's your HQ?'

But before the Hitler Youth could reply, Schwarz said, 'Sir, listen!'

Von Dodenburg spun round. 'Listen to what... I can't hear anything?'

'That's just it,' the major said urgently. 'There's no sound coming from Aachen!'

Von Dodenburg caught his breath. Schwarz was right. To their rear, the

sky was red with flames, but there was no sound from the place where his men had fought and died for so long. The Holy City of Aachen had fallen.

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At dawn a curtain of silence fell on the burning city. All that the tense GIs pushing their way up the littered streets could hear was the steady crackle of the flames, interrupted now and again by the crash of falling masonry as yet another shell-shattered ruin collapsed. Their enemies for so long had vanished, save for their dead sprawled in the dirty gutters like bundles of abandoned rags. Al and Benny broke away from the rest of the company and slipped by the red-raw, burned-out hulk of one of Wotan's Tigers, from which hung the obscene travesty of rags and bones which had once been an SS lieutenant.

'Round the back,' Benny said urgently, 'before the greedy bastards of F company get their dirty paws on the loot.'

Al nodded. Slinging his carbine and wincing with the pain of his torn shoulder where the Kraut dame had ripped panic-stricken at his flesh, he pushed his way into the rear entrance of the Hotel Quellenhof. Benny followed, grease-gun at the ready.

The former HQ was a shambles. Dead German officers lay everywhere among the bullet-pocked gilt furniture, and not all of them had been killed by Seitz's infantry. In front of a shattered wall mirror, a fat major lay dead, a pistol clasped in his nerveless fingers, half the side of his face blown away. While Benny covered him, Al looted the body expertly, stuffing the man's German Cross in Gold and Iron in his pocket, thrusting his Walther in his belt.

'Fifty bucks' worth at least,' Benny chortled. 'Check his teeth, Al'

The tall GI thrust open the man's stiffening jaws. Something at the back glinted. Swiftly he inserted the dental forceps he had looted in France and tugged. The gold tooth came out easily. He dropped it into the bagful of gold teeth that Benny held ready and rose to his feet.

'Okay, let's check the upstairs.'

Outside the men of F Company were breaking down the main door of the hotel. Hastily the two GIs clambered up the littered stairs. The corridor was filled with empty champagne bottles. Benny idly kicked a couple of them, just in case they might be full. One was. But he didn't pick it up. They

had been caught like that before – just outside Verviers – when the bottle turned out to be filled with the urine of some fleeing Kraut soldier who had greatly fancied himself as a comedian.

'Over here, Benny,' Al rapped. 'Cover me.' He hesitated at the door to Donner's office. 'NOW!' He smashed his foot against the door. It flew open. Benny raised his grease-gun. But there was no need to fire. The man in the black uniform, slumped back against the high chair, was dead.

'Jesus,' Benny said in disgust, 'will you get a load of that Kraut's kisser!'

'And will ya get a load of that Knight's Cross at his throat,' Al breathed, unmoved by the dead man's mutilated face. 'Worth all of sixty bucks in Pig Alley. Come on – quick!'

They pushed into the room, heavy with the bitter-almond smell of the cyanide capsule with which Donner had poisoned himself. Al snatched at the Knight's Cross. Donner's body began to slump to the floor, while Al stowed the precious decoration away.

'Check his choppers, Benny,' he ordered.

The private hesitated. 'I don't know, Al,' he said. 'That mug he's got turns my guts.'

'Then get the hell outta my way,' Al snorted and pushed him to one side. He pushed open Donner's jaw. 'Nix,' he announced. 'All false!' He ran his hands expertly over the black uniform. But he found nothing save a wallet which contained cards and a few grubby Reichmark notes. He dropped them in disgust. The boys were already using hundred-mark notes as latrine paper. For a moment he stared at Donner's mutilated face. Then he spotted the artificial eye. 'Hey, Benny,' he exclaimed, 'the Kraut's got a glass peeper!' He pressed his dirty fingers against the scarred cheek.

'What ya gonna to do?'

'What the hell do you think?' he grunted. 'He might have diamonds or something like that hidden behind it.' But the blood-red cavity was bare. 'Sonavabitch,' he cursed. 'All that fuss and feathers for goddam nothing!'

In a sudden fit of rage he tore open his flies while Benny stared at him open-mouthed.

'Jes-zus, Al, you're not gonna piss on him, are ya?'

'You betcha!'

Thus Devil Donner, whose soul was now undoubtedly on its way to hell, was subjected to the final indignity.

***

'Everybody out,' Schwarz croaked.

Obediently they stumbled from the big open Opel trucks which had brought them to the Führer's new HQ in the Hessian Hills, whence he would direct the last great offensive in the west.

They were utterly weary. Leather belts and equipment had bit deeply into their bare flesh under the fraying remains of their black tunics. Their feet, without socks or foot-rags, had been rubbed red-raw in their torn, rotting dice-beakers, during their long march through the Rhineland. Slowly they formed up with their battered weapons, the blood speeding through the paper bandages covering their wounds, while elegant staff officers, all monocles, gleaming, bespurred riding boots, immaculate cavalry breeches complete with the broad crimson stripe of the Greater General Staff, stared at them as if they were creatures from another world.

'Look at the pansy currant-crappers,' Schulze grunted wearily, 'popped up from their gold-plated bunkers to see what a front swine really looks like.'

Matz, supporting himself on a rifle, his wooden leg slung over his shoulder, spat drily on the cobbles. 'One wet fart,' he announced contemptuously, 'and yer'd kill the lot!'

Von Dodenburg, helmetless, his tunic, the buttons removed for the mine-clearing, tied with a safety pin, walked stiffly to the front of his men. Schwarz, a bandage round his head, stood to attention, the eager fanaticism gone from even his dark eyes.

'Parade – parade attention!' he commanded.

Wearily the veterans of Wotan came to a semblance of the attention position. Schwarz shuffled forward and touched his hand to his bandaged head. 'Two officers, seven NCOs and seventy men present, sir,' he said.

'Thank you, Schwarz,' von Dodenburg returned the salute. He was just about to command his men to stand at ease, when the two black Horchs swung into the courtyard of the Führer Headquarters.

'The Reichsheini,' Schulze whispered hastily, 'complete with some real soldiers.' He nodded at the two-metre-tall giants of Himmler's bodyguard, who were springing out in their immaculate black uniform, machine-pistols at the alert even before the Horchs had come to a stop.

Von Dodenburg presented the parade to Himmler, the former chicken-farmer who had become the most feared man in Europe. The Chief of the SS

nodded casually, his sickly pale face buried in his upturned greatcoat collar, the tip of his nose red and dripping. Slowly he inspected the men, stopping here and there to ask a question but not waiting to listen to the answer. For a moment he paused in front of Schulze's massive, bandaged bulk, looked at his Knight's Cross, and muttered something about, 'as long as we are biologically superior, we shall win', before passing on.

Out of the corner of his mouth, Schulze whispered to Matz, 'What the fuck does he think I am – a shitty bull or something?'

But Matz was unable to reply. For the great door leading to the main building was opening to reveal the unmistakable brown-booted figure of the Führer's 'grey eminence' Martin Bormann. The Führer was coming!

Von Dodenburg commanded 'eyes front'. Himmler got out of the way, hastening to meet the Führer, a cold smile on his thin face. The men of Wotan straightened up. It was nearly two years now since the veterans had been honoured by the presence of the Führer. Bormann turned, as if he were having actively to encourage the German Leader to emerge into the cold, grey October morning. Then the expectant SS men saw why.

In the two years that had passed since they had last seen the man who had once been master of Europe from the Urals to the Channel, he had changed dramatically. Now he was a stooped figure with a pale, puffy face, dragging one leg behind him, vainly trying to conceal the acute trembling of his hands.

'Jesus, Maria, Joseph!' Matz breathed, 'is that the Führer?'

Shakily, he allowed himself to be lead by the squat figure of his secretary until he was facing Wotan, his sick, old man's face almost buried in his greatcoat collar. He ignored von Dodenburg's salute. His glazed rheumy eyes were fixed on his men's faces. Slowly a tear began to trickle down his face, as if he were overcome by this sight that revealed just how much his soldiers were suffering at the front.

Bormann, his fat chest bare of any decoration save that of the Blood Order, awarded to those who shed blood for the Nazi cause before Hitler's rise to power, wiped it away and whispered in his coarse Mecklenburg accent, 'The speech, my Führer – the speech.'

Adolf Hitler nodded his head numbly and wet his lips. 'German soldiers! Front fighters! Comrades,' he began hoarsely, his voice pitched so low that the men of the rear rank had to strain their ears to understand. He hesitated abruptly, and looked at Bormann, as if he sought encouragement or

advice from him. Bormann nodded and gave a faint smile. Hitler clasped his hands together as if perhaps to control their trembling. 'If Germany loses this war, comrades, it will have proved itself biologically inferior and will have forfeited its future existence. But... it is the West that is forcing us to fight to the end.'

His voice began to grow in strength, as he warmed to his theme and von Dodenburg felt a trace of the old magic, but only a trace.

'It is, therefore, fitting that the West should be punished for this dastardly crime. And you and I will ensure that they are punished. Since September every step has been taken to raise a strong western front. Countless new units have replaced our losses in France. Colossal artillery forces have been raised. New, secret and terrible weapons are in place.' His hoarse Upper Austrian voice rose suddenly to the mesmeric height it had once achieved in the heady, great days of the pre-war Nuremberg Rallies and von Dodenburg felt a cold thrill of recognition. 'Thanks to your heroic actions at Aachen, Great Germany is now in a position to pay the West back – those Judeo-plutocrats, whose hands are steeped in the blood of innocent German women and children. At this hour, the eyes of the German nation are upon you, my brave fighters of Wotan, relying on your steadfastness, your ardour, your arms and your heroism to smother the dastardly Anglo-Americans in a sea of blood

The Führer broke off suddenly, an almost guilty look on his face, now flecked pink with the effort of speaking.

A few moments later, von Dodenburg knew why. Just before the Führer went inside again, supported by Bormann, he clasped both von Dodenburg's hands in his, genuine tears of emotion in his faded eyes. 'Colonel, I thank you,' he whispered. 'Germany thanks you. You and your heroic soldiers have done the impossible. Aachen was not a defeat. You held the enemy long enough there for us to plan a new blow against him – a great new blow which will be the turning point of this bloody war. The new offensive in the west.' His faded eyes bored into von Dodenburg's face with a faint trace of their old hypnotism. 'Do you understand?'

'A new offensive in the west, my Führer?' von Dodenburg repeated.

'Yes.' Hitler lowered his voice, as if he were afraid of being overheard. 'Yes, von Dodenburg. Before the year is out we shall strike again. You and your brave men, plus the many eager new recruits who will join their ranks soon, will have the honour of leading that great attack.'

He stopped abruptly and stared at the officer, as if he expected von Dodenburg to say something. But all the bemused young Colonel could ask was: 'Where, my Führer?'

Adolf Hitler's face cracked into the parody of a conspiratorial grin, 'Where? Why, where those American gangsters least expect us – the Ardennes!'

And then he was gone, shuffling back to the warmth of his HQ guided by a solicitous Bormann, as if he were an old, old man, who had had his breath of fresh air for this day and who had now to be led back to the comforting atmosphere of his seat near the stove.

***

And in the officers' latrine, from which the two senior Wotan NCOs had hurriedly flushed out a group of elegant staff officers by means of two juicy farts and a massive discharge of what Schulze called 'green smoke', Schulze and Matz squatted in silence and stared at each other across the passage.

Outside, the rest of the Wotan men were wolfing down sausage and sauerkraut from Reich Leader Bormann's own kitchen. But Matz and Schulze were too weary even to be tempted by the best meal Wotan had eaten in many weeks.

'You know, Schulze, old horse,' Matz said, too exhausted to strain, content just to slump there on the scrubbed wooden boards and ruminate, 'a crap like this in a proper thunder-box, instead of balancing your arse on a pole between two ration crates, is one of the finest things in the world – even better than dipping yer wick sometimes.'

Schulze nodded morosely, only half listening. 'What we gonna do, Matz?' he asked.

'What do you mean, Schulze?'

'What do you think I mean, you cripple of a marmalade-shitter?' he snorted. 'How long are we gonna stand this? Getting slaughtered like this, reformed with a bunch of green beaks from the Hitler Youth, still wet behind the spoons, and then getting slaughtered again. It can't go on for ever, can it?'

Matz opened his mouth slowly. But he never answered the question, any more than anyone else did in the Third Reich during that fifth year of total war. There was no answer then to that question. Outside the same old whistles started to shrill. Schwarz rapped out orders. There was a rattle of

mess-tins, followed by the survivors' groans of protest. Schulze rose wearily, pulling up his worn black trousers.

'Come on, Matz,' he said, his voice full of resignation. 'Get up, yer've had yer crap. Duty calls.'

Von Dodenburg placed himself at the head of his ragged men, his thin handsome face grim and hard at the knowledge of what lay before him once his Battle Group had been reformed with the eager volunteers from the Hitler Youth.

'Battle Group Wotan,' he snapped. 'Battle Group Wotan – forward march!'

Marching behind the CO, knowing that everything was hopeless, yet proud of the handful of weary young veterans who made up the Wotan, Sergeant-Major Schulze bellowed in that tremendous voice of his, 'A song!'

'A song – one, two, three!' sang out the lead singer, a tall youth marching in the front rank, his arm in a bloody sling. 'Blow the bugle, beat the drum –'

The survivors of the Battle for Aachen, their eyes sunk deep in their emaciated faces, marching off to new quarters and new tasks, burst into their brutal song as one:

'Blow the bugle, beat the drum
Clear the street, here comes the Wo-tan!
Steel is our weapon
To hew through bone.
Blood our purpose,
Wotan hold close.
For Death is our Destiny.'

Then they were gone, leaving the silence echoing behind them.

– THE END –

SS PANZER BATTALION

DOGS OF WAR – VOLUME THREE

by Leo Kessler

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"Blood is our beer, steel our meat,
Nothing we fear, we know no defeat.
Better dead than red.
SS Assault Battalion Wotan, march – enemy ahead!"

The marching song of SS Panzer Battalion

BOOK I – THE ROAD TO BATTLE

"Gentlemen, you realise the importance of our task. If we fail we hold up the whole advance of the Greater German Wehrmacht!"

Captain Geier, C.O. 2nd Company, Wotan to his officers. 8 May, 1940.

CHAPTER 1

"*Stillgestanden!*"

Two hundred pairs of army boots crashed to attention as one. As the troop train which had brought them to Eifel started to draw away from the platform, Obersturmführer Schwarz reported to the officer who had come from the battalion to meet them. "Draft from Sennelager! All present and correct, sir!" Schwarz gave the First Lieutenant an immaculate salute and stared at him fiercely.

First Lieutenant von Dodenburg, whose chest bore the black wound medal and the ribbon of the Iron Cross, acknowledged it with the casual air of the veteran.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he said to Schwarz. He turned to the draft. "When we leave the station, we sing; and when I say sing, I mean it. So that the locals can hear that we're not the Army, but the SS!"

Schulze, the draft's comedian, nudged his neighbour and indicated the peasants staring at the soldiers in open-mouthed awe, "Them dummies look as if they've got to be told to come in out of the rain. Bet they don't even know what the SS is!"

"Quiet there!" Schwarz yelled, as he prepared to march the draft out of the station.

***

"A song – one, two, three!" the draft's 'first voice' commanded as they swung into the Street of the SA. Two hundred lusty young voices crashed into the first verse of the *Horst Wessel Lied*. Fat-bellied local Storm Troopers snapped to attention as the noise of National Socialist Germany's second national anthem filled the narrow cobbled street. But the undersized peasants who lined the pavements did not react. They stared at the eager young giants who stamped by them on the worn cobbles as if they were invaders from another planet.

"Look at 'em," Schulze's neighbour whispered, breaking off in the middle of 'their brittle bones shall tremble'. "They don't like the SS. Half of 'em have got French blood in them anyway. That's why we're here. To kick

the Frenchies out of the Maginot Line, and teach this lot what it means to be German."

Schulze grinned and winked at a pretty, dark-haired girl, who blushed and looked away hurriedly. "No," he whispered. "The Führer hasn't sent us down here to fight, lad. He wants his SS to put a bit of German beef into the local girls. We're not here to fight. We're here to –"

"One more word from you," a harsh voice cut in, "and I'll have your name in my book quicker than you can pull out your filthy tail!"

They swung round a corner, past the onion-towered Catholic church, and saw ahead of them the red-brick pile of the Adolf Hitler Barracks, their new home.

***

Kuno von Dodenburg clasped the hilt of the dagger of honour which Reichsführer Himmler had handed to him personally upon his graduation from the Bad Toelz SS Officers' School two years before. "Parade march!" he bellowed, as he marched under the wooden arch which bore the motto OUR HONOUR IS OUR LOYALTY.

Behind him the irrepressible Schulze echoed the command. "Parade march – the captain's got a hole in his arse!" But his words were drowned by the steel-shod clash of two hundred pairs of jackboots hitting the concrete of the parade ground. At their head von Dodenburg could not suppress a shiver of pleasure at the sound. He knew he was behaving like a recruit at his first parade. After four years in the SS he should be able to accept it for what it was – a drill movement. But he couldn't. For him the crash of heavy boots striking the ground in perfect unison symbolised the new Greater Germany, marching from victory to victory. And the men at whose head he had the-honour to march were the elite of the German Wehrmacht – the Black Guards; still raw admittedly and in need of more training, but already assigned to the elite of the elite – *die Leibstandarte*, the Adolf Hitler Bodyguard Division.

***

"Morning, soldiers!" Captain Geier yelled as soon as von Dodenburg had reported to him.

"Morning, Captain!" came back the traditional reply.

Captain Geier, their new company commander, was a small thin officer, whose monocle and light grey breeches, with their cowhide inlet, marked him clearly for what he was – a regular officer who had transferred from the Army to the Armed SS because promotion was better. His mouth was a thin line, as hard as his icy-blue eyes. But it was not the mouth nor the eyes that drew the draft's attention – it was the Captain's nose, a monstrous abomination of flesh which would have been laughable on another man. It made him look every bit the vulture, which was his whispered nickname among the soldiers. But laugh at Captain Geier and one lived to regret it. After von Dodenburg had recovered from the chest wound he received in the Polish campaign of the previous autumn and had been posted to Geier's company, he soon learned that the captain was not a man to be fooled with.

"Stand at ease!" Geier commanded. He slapped his riding cane against the side of his highly polished topboots. "Soldiers, my name is Geier, which I am told, aptly suits my appearance." He stroked his monstrous nose, as if to emphasise his point, but no one laughed.

"At present, as you can see, my rank is that of a captain. But my father was a general and before this war is over, I promise you I shall be General Geier too." He pointed his cane at them challengingly. "And do you know how I shall do it?" He answered his own question in the thin rasping Prussian Army voice that all the regular Wehrmacht officers von Dodenburg had known, seemed to affect. "I shall do it on your backs and, when you die, on the backs of those who come after you – as they undoubtedly will."

Next to von Dodenburg, Schwarz's sallow face broke into a faint smile, as if Captain Geier were joking. But von Dodenburg knew his company commander was deadly serious. The previous September Geier had led a full company of the pre-war Bodyguard into the Battle of Bzura in Central Poland. With great dash he had taken his objective and become the first officer in the whole of the Wehrmacht to win the Iron Cross, First Class. The Führer himself had presented the decoration. But it had been gained at the cost of a shattered shoulder, which made it impossible for Geier to carry anything heavier than a riding cane in his right hand, and the loss of three-quarters of his company. The draft was here to replace those dead, nearly a hundred and twenty of them.

"You have now joined the premier regiment of the Armed SS," Geier went on. "The battalion to which you belong from this moment onwards is

the best within that regiment and it goes without saying that the best company in that battalion is my company. Do you understand that?" His eyes searched their ranks for any sign of weakness or doubt, but there was none. For the young men who faced him were the best that National Socialist Germany could produce – devoted followers of the Führer, whose last six years in the Hitler Youth and the Work Service had been one long preparation for this proud moment when they finally joined the formation which bore the bold white legend 'Adolf Hitler' on the arm of its field-grey uniform.

"I cannot tell you the details of your assignment here in the West," Geier continued. "All I can tell you is that you will have exactly three months to prepare for it. But when we march west and show those damned *Tommies* and *Poilus* how to break the Olympic record in running back to where they came from, I want you men of the Second Company to work like the devil for me. I have the medal." He tapped his chest with the riding cane. "That's enough tin for the time being until the Führer, in his wisdom, decides that he'll cure my throatache." The Captain was referring to the Knight's Cross which was worn round the neck and was jokingly referred to as 'throatache'; yet there was something unpleasantly cynical about his reference to the decoration as 'tin'. "This time I want something more tangible. I want to come out of the next campaign in the West as commander of this battalion. Do you understand?"

He let the words sink in. "I do not ask you to love me. I do not ask you to respect me. All I ask from you is that you obey my orders with unquestioning obedience." His eyes swept their ranks once more. "And God help any one of you, soldier, NCO or officer, who fails to do exactly that." The Vulture's voice rose harshly. "Soldiers I welcome you to SS Assault Battalion Wotan!"

CHAPTER 2

The duty NCO blew his whistle and banged open the door. "*Aufstehen!*" he yelled at the top of his voice as if he were on the parade ground and the sleeping men were a hundred yards away, and not ten feet. "Hands off cocks – on socks!" They woke up immediately. In their four months in the SS the draft had learned long ago that it didn't pay to linger. At the door the duty NCO in his tracksuit, whistle hanging round his neck, hands on hips, stared grimly while they dropped on to the polished floor from their wooden double-decker beds.

"*Ausziehen!*" he commanded when they were all out of bed.

Swiftly they pulled off their old-fashioned issue nightshirts and stood naked and shivering in the cold air that came through the wide-open door.

The duty NCO mustered them contemptuously, not even granting them the comfort of movement. Finally he snapped, "*Lueften!*" They pulled down the blackout shutters and opened the big windows. Ice-cold air streamed in. The soldiers' teeth chattered.

"Sergeant," said Schulze. "I think mine's going to shrink away altogether in this blizzard. Do you think I could report sick."

The duty NCO's expression did not change. "You may Schulze," he said. But I warn you that the MO was on the booze last night. He's got the shakes this morning. If you want him to sew it back on again for you..." he shrugged and left the rest of the sentence unfinished. "All right now – shower!"

They scampered for the showers at the end of the room. As each one entered, he raised himself on the fixed bar and did the obligatory three pull-ups. A moment later the duty NCO turned on the icy water at full blast. "Rotten sadist!" someone yelled, but the NCO had already moved on to rouse the inmates of the next room. The first day of training in 2nd Company, SS Assault Battalion Wotan had begun.

***

"My name is Butcher – butcher by trade, butcher by name, and butcher by inclination," the red-faced Sergeant-Major Metzger bellowed at the men of

the 2nd Company, standing rigidly to attention in the centre of the square. His rat-trap of a mouth snapped open again and his voice, oiled by countless cheap cigars and litres of beer, roared across the parade ground and bounced off the walls two hundred metres away. "Believe you me, nothing in this world would give me greater pleasure than to make mincemeat of you heap of wet sacks! Do you get that?"

Sergeant-Major Metzger, 2nd Company's senior NCO, glared at the new arrivals. Standing there as if some God of War had planted him in the middle of the parade ground to show pale-faced recruits what a real soldier looked like, he ran his eyes along their ranks. They flicked from soldier to soldier, looking for a button undone, a helmet set at a wrong angle, a dull belt buckle – anything which he could use to demonstrate his well-known ability to 'turn a man into a sow'. He was proud of this ability and was wont to boast of it to his drinking cronies in the NCO's wet canteen.

To his disappointment Metzger found nothing that would grant him an opportunity to give expression to one of his celebrated outbursts of temper. Almost reluctantly he got down to the business of the day. "All right then," he bellowed, "we'll get on with it! Stand at ease."

Automatically their left feet shot out. Metzger placed his hands behind his back and began to raise himself up and down on his toes. It was a movement he had seen in an old film about the First World War. The gesture had pleased him and he had adopted it as soon as he had been promoted to Corporal five years before. In his considered opinion, it intimidated the average SS man and he was pleased to note now that the eyes of the front rank followed his up-and-down movement with slightly scared expectation.

"You think you're already soldiers," he began. "But you're not. You're a bunch of chimney-sweeps run wild, a lot of rooting sows, a collection of slack arseholes..." He ended his litany of abuse with his favourite phrase: "A bunch of shit! Now it is my duty and those of the NCOs to attempt to turn a bunch of shit like you into something approaching soldiers." He raised his hand as if to ward off their protests. "I know, it is almost tempting fate to make the attempt. Who in his right mind would ever think it possible, save perhaps the Butcher?" But I have promised the CO that I will try." His voice rose from the mock sentimental to its true fury. "And heaven, arse and twine, God and His Son protect anyone of you wet sacks who dare let me down! *I'll cut his cock off! God help me, so I will.*"

***

SS Assault Battalion Wotan's assault course was one kilometre long – the brainchild of some ardent follower of the Marquis de Sade. A narrow plank suspended ten metres above the ground, a drop into a nettle-filled ditch, its walls sheer mud, a twenty-metre crawl under knee-high barbed wire, a wooden-plank wall fifteen metres high, a terrifying lunge for mud-slippery ropes an arm's length away, a breath-catching plunge into an icy, fast-flowing stream and finally five rounds rapid fire at moving targets.

The Butcher, coolly standing at the end of the course, stop-watch in hand, looked at the mud-stained, chest-heaving company in naked contempt. "Ten minutes," he sneered, "what do you think this is – a shitty girls' school obstacle race or something? Even those wet sacks of the First Company can do the course in nine-fifty and everybody knows they're a bunch of warm brothers. Too much playing with it at night, that's what it is. Five against one! Now I bet if one of them poxy whores from the house behind the barracks – yes, your old Sergeant-Major has got eyes in his head. He wasn't born yesterday – were to lift up her skirts and show you dirty men her drawers, you'd be chasing after her quick enough!"

"You know what his problem is, mate?" Schulze said to his neighbour. "It's his missus. She's got pepper in her pants and the Butcher can't give her enough."

"Did you say something, soldier?" the Butcher snarled.

"Yessir," Schulze answered dutifully. "I said, perhaps we aren't trying hard enough!"

Metzger snorted. "Well, at least one of you rooting sows knows what I'm talking about. All right, let's do it again."

Groggily, their eyes glazed with exhaustion, their heavy packs biting into their shoulders, they lined up to begin the course once more.

***

A skinny blond soldier with thin artistic hands hung on to the steel stake driven into the side of the plank wall. In vain he tried to lever himself up to the next one, but his muscles would not pull him any further. He was beat like the rest of the 2nd Company. This was the fourth time they had been over the course. The man hung like a piece of limp meat, tears streaming

down his muddy face.

"You drunken crab, get up that wall!" the Butcher yelled, "or do you want me to come over there and help you up? By God, you'll regret it, if I do!"

"I can't, Sergeant-Major!" the soldier gasped. Behind him Schulze put up his hand and pushed with all his strength. The soldier almost shot over the top of the wall.

"Who told you to do that, soldier?" the Butcher screamed, his red eyes bulging.

"My hand slipped, Sergeant-Major," Schulze answered. "Muddy as hell up here."

Before Metzger had time to reply, he heaved himself up and over. The next moment he was dropping into nothing, his hands catching the wet rope just in time.

***

They lay face downwards in the frozen grass like dying men. The sweat poured from their bodies in spite of the cold and the backs of their drill uniforms were black with moisture. "I'd like to get him alone at the back of the barracks," someone gasped. "I'd cut his bleeding balls off with a blunt knife."

"You and whose army?" Schulze asked with dry contempt. "Give it a couple of months and you'll be as bad as that bastard yourself."

"Nobody could ever get that bad," the youth who had been stuck on the wall said. His hands were a bloody mess where he had ripped his nails climbing up. "Not bad like that. It's impossible. I don't –"

A sharp voice cut into the conversation. "Sar'nt Major, what kind of a damned piggery is this!"

"Sir!" the Butcher bellowed at the top of his voice. They turned in sudden alarm as the Sergeant-Major gave Lieutenant Schwarz a tremendous salute and made his report, "Second Company, Assault Battalion Wotan on assault course. One hundred and seventy-two men present. Nothing special to report, Sir!"

The sallow little officer looked up at the NCO. "Nothing special to report, did you say, Sergeant-Major?" He pointed at the sweat-lathered men sprawled on the ground exhausted, "And what do you call that?"

The Butcher tried to bluster, but Schwarz cut him short. "An SS man is an elite soldier, Sergeant-Major. He can't afford to loll about like those chaps in the Army can. I'm afraid you're molly coddling them – you're too soft on them. Now trot off to my car and get the box you'll find behind the seat."

Like an obedient recruit, glad to get out of the way before the matter developed any further, the burly Sergeant-Major trotted off to carry out the Lieutenant's order, while the latter passed the time by making the exhausted company do a few press-ups – using the left hand only.

While the company formed a circle round him, their chests heaving with the fresh exertion, Schwarz opened the wooden box. He took out a small metal object and straightened up again. "A British Mills bomb, vintage 1916, captured in Poland last September. This," he touched the metal pin, "is the firing pin. If I pull it out, the bomb will explode within four seconds."

Calmly and deliberately he pulled out the pin but kept his hand round the lever it released. "If I were to drop this now," he said, "every one of you within ten yards' range would be killed or severely wounded. Now, I'd like you all to take ten paces to the rear."

Mystified and not a little scared, the men shuffled back the required distance. Schwarz waited patiently.

"In Bad Toelz, we had a little game that was perhaps a little silly, but I think it did separate the men from the cowards. It went something like this. We took a grenade and placed it on the crown of our helmets." He suited the action to his words. Suddenly the faces all around him went pale, as the men guessed what he was going to do next.

"Thereupon we released the pin." The lever went whining through the air. Schwarz did not seem to notice. But his voice was a little strained as he said, "Now one has about three seconds left. The trick is to keep one's head perfectly straight. If you tremble, you have no head left to –"

The explosion drowned the rest of his words. A vicious red-yellow flame spurted momentarily from the top of his helmet. Red-hot slivers of razor-sharp steel hissed through the air in all directions. The men of the 2nd Company hurled themselves to the ground.

Schwarz, standing rigidly to attention in their midst, looked down at their sickly-white faces maliciously. "Soft tails!" he sneered. "Frightened by a little bit of a firework. half of you look as if you've wet your knickers!"

He gave them a few seconds to get back to their feet again. With an impatient sweep of his pale hand he knocked the remaining fragments from

the scorched top of his helmet and turned to the Butcher, whose face was also drained of colour. "Sergeant-Major," he snapped, business-like again, "I want you to issue grenades to the first twenty men and then stand them twenty metres apart."

The Butcher, recovering himself quickly and obviously relieved that the officer did not expect him to participate in this crazy exercise, shouted at the men in the front rank, "Didn't you hear what the officer said? What's wrong with you? Have you been eating big beans or something? Get the lead out of your arses –you, you and you pick up those grenades! Come on now."

Reluctantly the first men moved over to the wooden box to receive one of the deadly little eggs. But they were fated not to go through with the exercise. Suddenly the cultured voice of First Lieutenant Kuno von Dodenburg broke into the proceedings. "Lieutenant Schwarz," it said softly, "I wonder if I could speak to you for a moment?"

Schulze breathed out an audible sigh of relief.

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"Schwarz," Kuno von Dodenburg snapped, trying to check his anger, "the purpose of training is not to kill your men but to prepare them for battle in such a manner that they won't get killed."

"What do you mean?" Schwarz asked angrily.

"I mean, comrade," von Dodenburg said softly, using the familiar term in order to appear not to be pulling rank on the other man who was probably only a year younger than he was himself, though he had been in the Black Guards less than a year, "that that business with the grenade was damn stupid and might have ended unfortunately."

"To make an omelette, you have to crack eggs," Schwarz persisted. "Even in training there have to be casualties. The weak, the cowards, the unfit must go by the board so that the brave may survive on the battlefield."

"There are no brave men on a battlefield," von Dodenburg said, knowing that he was sounding like his father at his worst. "There are only fools and skilled soldiers."

"Then how did you get that bit of tin?" Schwarz asked, pointing to his black wound medal.

Von Dodenburg grinned. "For keeping my mouth shut when my company commander made a balls up of things in Poland and then helping

him to get out of the shit he had landed himself in."

"I must remind you, sir, that although you are my superior officer," Schwarz said with sudden icy formality, "there are certain things which I am bound by my honour as an officer of the Armed SS and my membership of the National Socialist Party to report." He lowered his voice a little. "Perhaps it would be wise of you to remember, Lieutenant von Dodenburg, who my uncle is."

Von Dodenburg's face creased in a look of utter disbelief as he stared down at Schwarz. When he spoke, each word was like the drop off an icicle. With the authority of ten generations of Prussian cavalry officers behind him, he snapped icily, "Schwarz you are a garden dwarf, a nasty little garden dwarf! In addition, you are a complete arsehole! I know exactly who your uncle is. Now what are you? … And stand to attention, man, when I speak to you!"

Like a green recruit, Schwarz standing rigidly to attention, said, "I am a garden dwarf, a nasty little garden dwarf..."

His voice trailed away.

"Louder!" von Dodenburg bellowed, pushing his face into Schwarz's.

"And in addition," Schwarz whispered miserably, "I am a complete arsehole."

"How right you are. Now get those men back into their billets and tell that fool of a sergeant-major to report to me within half-an-hour that they have had their cuts and bruises treated and are being properly fed. I hold you responsible for him, Schwarz. Do you understand?"

"Yessir."

"Then don't stand there, man! Get on with it!"

Schwarz ran off as if he were trying to break some record.

CHAPTER 3

But in spite of von Dodenburg's intense dislike of Schwarz's concepts of training that went directly against those advocated by Brigadegeneral Berger – the real founder of the Armed SS – he knew that a certain amount of dangerous training had to be chanced. In Poland he had seen how a single German tank had panicked a whole Polish infantry company by simply driving over the first enemy foxhole. The Poles had scrambled frantically from their holes, flung away their weapons and fled in panic.

Although the Vulture had still not revealed their mission to his officers – "My dear von Dodenburg, you will learn that unfortunate piece of news early enough, believe you me," had been his answer to von Dodenburg's query on the subject – he knew it must be against the French or English. And both had tanks, lots of them. Von Dodenburg therefore decided that although it was highly dangerous he would have to train the 2nd Company to face up to a tank attack on their positions.

The morning was beautiful, with the winter sunshine sparkling on the whitened roofs and the birds singing, as they marched out of the town up to the training ground on the hill, where the ancient Mark I tank was already waiting for them, its black-clad crew stamping their feet on the snowy ground to keep warm.

Von Dodenburg halted the company and strode across to the sergeant of the Panzerwaffe, who reported smartly enough, though his eyes under the big black beret were fixed anxiously on the shining young faces of the SS men chattering in the background. "One Mark I tank, crew three, present, sir!"

"Thank you, Sergeant." Von Dodenburg acknowledged his salute and then as casually as he could, he asked, "Everything all right and ready to go, Sergeant?"

"Yes sir," the tank man said.

Von Dodenburg strode back to his men. "In front of you, you see a Mark I tank, all six-and-a-half tons of it. A nasty looking object indeed, you must agree, especially if you're infantry without any anti-tank weapons at hand. Now let us assume that it was a Tommy *Valentine* or one of the new French *chars* and it was advancing on you, what would you do?"

No one volunteered any information, until Schulze put up his hand like an overgrown schoolboy.

"Yes, Schulze?"

"Run like hell, sir," he said cheekily.

Von Dodenburg smiled. "The Gods take care of fools, the ancient Greeks said, but let us say that you didn't want to run away. Instead you preferred to stand and fight heroically, or perhaps you'd hurt your foot and couldn't run," he added for Schulze's sake.

"You'd dig a hole, sir," a soldier suggested.

"Exactly." He pulled down the cuff of his elegant grey glove and glanced at his wristwatch, "and you've got exactly fifteen minutes to do just that."

The company groaned. They had obviously been expecting the order. It was part of the old Army game that they had come to know only too well in these last few months: "*Anybody here studied music? Yes. All right then, come over here and help to move the piano. Any of you men a plumber? Good, then go and clean out the officers' latrines.*"

Grumbling good-humouredly they got out their entrenching tools and began to hack at the iron-hard earth below the snow. Von Dodenburg watched for a moment, then he undid his own spade and started to dig his own foxhole, while behind them at the tank the crew smoked nervously.

Von Dodenburg gave them five minutes. "Just so that you'll get the lead out of your lazy arses," he yelled, poised over the pile of earth he had already raised. "It might interest you to know that in exactly ten minutes from now, that tank will roll over your foxholes – each individual hole. And if you are a coward like me, you'll dig like hell!"

He bent down again so that he didn't have to see the look of consternation and fear which shot into their eyes. Suddenly a heavy silence fell over the training ground, broken only by the harsh breathing of the digging men and the scrape of their shovels on the hard earth, as they worked like men possessed.

Kuno crouched in his hole. The tip of his helmet was level with the edge of the trench, and the fifteen minutes were up. He rose again and shouted. "Time! Everyone down now! Sergeant, start up your sledge!"

There was no answering laughter from the men crouching in the holes.

The Sergeant threw away his cigarette end. Below in the dark interior the driver pressed the starter button and the 120-horsepower engine burst into

life with an ear-splitting roar. The Sergeant kicked the driver's left shoulder, and the latter pulled back the left tiller bar. With a rusty squeak the tank lurched forward and began to rattle over the uneven ground to the line of brown holes, which looked like the work of some gigantic mole.

As Kuno had agreed upon with the sergeant, the tank headed for his foxhole first. The roar was above him now, blotting out the light. The young officer, as pale and as frightened as his men, huddled at the bottom of his hole. His lungs were filled with the stench of diesel. His eardrums threatened to burst with the tremendous roar. Instinctively he closed his eyes like a little child and tried to blot it out from his mind. The heat of the exhaust seared the back of his neck, then it was gone. Cautiously he poked his head above the edge of his hole, a wave of relief surging through his body. Behind the tracks, throwing up dirt and pebbles in their wake, head after head was beginning to pop up.

At last the tank came to a halt. The Sergeant turned and wiped the sweat from his face. Von Dodenburg could see his anxious gaze running from hole to hole and the relief mirrored clearly on his face at each new head which popped up. But from three holes there was no sign of life. He thought of his own criticism of Schwarz a couple of days before and clambered hastily from his hole, but before he had reached the blank holes, Schulze, his face black with mud, rose from his slit trench and roared in a fair imitation of an old Regular Army sergeant, "Beg to report, sir, three casualties!"

Von Dodenburg stopped in his tracks.

Schulze grinned cheekily, his teeth a dazzling white against the black mask. "Two fainted," he added, "*and one shit hissen!*"

"Thank you, Schulze."

"There's just one thing, sir," Schulze added.

"Yes?"

"What would have happened if that tank had swivelled round on its tracks on the top of our holes?" Don't you think the Tommies'll be smart enough to know that that's the way to break in the sides of a foxhole?"

"Schulze," von Dodenburg said slowly, "you're too damn smart to be allowed to run around loose."

"That's what my mother always used to say, sir," Schulze said, in no way put out by the veiled threat.

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That same evening Kuno von Dodenburg called the big Hamburger, who was half a head taller than himself, to his quarters. Schulze squeezed through the narrow doorway and snapped to attention.

Von Dodenburg left him standing for a moment while he pretended to busy himself in front of a mirror. When he looked up he caught Schulze grinning at his back in the mirror. "What are you grinning for like a monkey up a stick?" he rapped.

"Nothing, sir. I was just born with a mug like this," Schulze said. "Some people are born with mugs that only a mother could love. Others have faces that you'd like to spring at with your naked arse, if you'll forgive me speaking good German? And then there are others who have happy faces – like me."

"Happy faces," von Dodenburg commented. "Looks more like dumb insolence to me."

"At your command, Senior Lieutenant," Schulze barked with undue formality, the smile wiped off his face as if by some invisible hand.

"Insolent sow!" von Dodenburg said without any anger. "All right, Schulze, relax."

"Relax – military or civvie, sir?" Schulze asked.

"What's the difference?"

"I could write a book about it, sir."

"I understand – civvie."

The shoulders slumped immediately. The line of the chin softened and with a quick twist of his thumb and forefinger he snapped open the catch of his tight collar.

"Why don't you strip completely?" von Dodenburg asked sarcastically.

"I would, sir, but my mother said I should never take my clothes off in front of strangers."

Von Dodenburg ignored the remark. "Tell me, Schulze," he said, "how the devil did you ever get into Assault Battalion Wotan? Somehow or other – to put it mildly – you just don't look the type."

Schulze was in no way offended. "Well, sir," he began slowly, "when the Greater German Reich realised what a threat those Polacks were and the Führer, in his far-seeing wisdom, decided that we must invade Poland in order to protect ourselves, I decided the time had come to do my bit." He licked his big lips.

Kuno von Dodenburg looked up at the massive Hamburger, realising that Schulze was pulling his leg, yet knowing that the latter was too cunning to allow himself to get caught "Go on," he said, "with the story of your patriotic struggle for Fatherland and Führer."

"Well, I wouldn't put it exactly like that, sir," Schulze objected, his face a study in mock seriousness. "You see there was a girl involved. She was a member of the *Beauty and Belief Organisation*. But in this case she wasn't all belief and definitely no beauty." He made a quick female shape, sweeping his calloused hands through the air. "Built like a brick shithouse, she was, sir, if you'll forgive my good German once more. Well, with a girl like that I couldn't have joined the Coastal Artillery or the Supply Service. She wouldn't have opened her pearly gates for anybody who served in a rear-line outfit like that. No sir, it had to be the SS or nothing. Naturally I knew I wouldn't be accepted. I had a reserved job in the docks. And besides I've always had a weak chest." He coughed hollowly and rapped his chest. "My poor mother often said she wondered how I ever survived with all the colds I had as a kid. Anyone in his right mind could see I wouldn't measure up to the high standards of the SS."

"Naturally," von Dodenburg agreed.

"Not that sow of an MO though. He counted my teeth as if I were some old nag, sniffed under my armpit to check if I were a Yid and grabbed hold of my short arm and made me cough, as if you were supposed to use it to clear your throat and not for a bit of the other. Then he passed me fit, and I was in the SS. Me, the son of old Red Schulze of Barmbek – that damned notorious communist suburb in Hamburg – who would have turned over in his grave if he'd have known I'd gone to serve under Adolf – excuse me, sir, the Führer, Adolf Hitler. So here I am, the lowest form of life in Assault Battalion Wotan."

"And the girl?"

"Her! It turned out a lot different than I thought, sir. On my first leave, I came home all dressed up like a dog's dinner in my number one uniform, sports medal, my monkey swing I got for being such a crack shot, the lot and took her out to the Cafe Vaterland for a drink and a dance. It's been my experience that when you've got 'em dancing a bit, with your knee between their legs in the tango, you have 'em halfway on their backs already. But when it came for her to open the pearly gates back in her flat there were tears and protests and lots of fuss and feathers, but none of the other."

"Why not?"

"Cause she didn't like men, it turned out. It was girls and bits of rubber. Can you imagine it, sir? A girl preferring that to a real bit of meat! I bet the rubber's ersatz too."

"Undoubtedly," von Dodenburg said and suddenly burst out laughing.

Schulze watched him without the suspicion of a grin on his face, as if he were studying some rare form of life. Finally he said with unusual politeness, "If I may draw the Senior Lieutenant's attention to the fact, the Senior Lieutenant requested me to come to his quarters for some particular reason." Then the respectful tone disappeared and his voice assumed its normal thick waterfront accent, which most of the Southerners in 2nd Company could not understand. "Besides, that Bavarian hillbilly who shat himself this morning is going to spring a round of free beer in the wet canteen in ten minutes' time."

Von Dodenburg shook his head in mock despair. "All right, I need a general dogsbody – driver, runner, etc., and I thought of you."

Schulze's eyes lit up. "A batman, sir?" he asked enthusiastically. "My old man was a batman in the War and all he ever got was a dose of pox in Brussels."

"No, I didn't mean my batman. Captain Geier does not believe in such animals. You'll still carry out your normal company duties while we're in training, but as soon as we go on active duty status, you'll revert to me as a personal orderly. What do you say?"

"Sounds all right to me, sir. There's just one thing. If I could come over and have a look-see if everything was all right in your quarters in the morning, then I'd be prepared to accept your offer, sir."

"So that you won't have to do the morning fatigues?"

"No, sir! I've been on the craphouse ever since I came here, sir. And in the early morning those thunderboxes fair turn my guts over!"

"All right, Schulze, you're on. You're certainly not as dumb as you look."

CHAPTER 4

"You're certainly not as dumb as you look."

Sergeant-Major Metzger had already come to that conclusion himself, though it had taken him a little longer to do so than it had Lieutenant von Dodenburg; but then everything took a little longer with the Butcher. As his cronies in the NCOs' wet canteen were wont to say, "Sergeant-Major Metzger doesn't know his ear from his arsehole most of the time." Nevertheless he had been smart enough to work his way up to the most coveted NCO position in the company.

As far as the Butcher could see, Schulze was an excellent soldier. But somehow he lacked that 'animal seriousness' which the Sergeant-Major expected from his men. He saluted like a Prussian grenadier, but there was always something akin to sarcasm in his eyes. His parade march was the best in the whole battalion, but as soon as he relaxed, his gait was as sloppy as any Ami cowboy. And although Schulze always seemed polite enough, the Butcher had a sneaking feeling that the ex-docker was pulling his leg when he spoke to him. As he told his cronies in the wet canteen, "You can say what you like, *meine Herren*, but I think that fly shit of a sailor is pulling my pisser half the time."

In the notebook which replaced his brain, Sergeant-Major Metzger made a little black cross against the name 'Schulze, Richard' and promised himself he'd keep an eye on the man; it was a promise which boded no good for Schulze, Richard.

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It was a cold grey afternoon. There was snow in the air and above the firing range the clouds were leaden. But Schulze did not let himself be deflected by the weather or by the pain in his groin. He'd made too much of a pig of himself the night before in the big house behind the barracks. "Man, you go at it like Blücher and his cavalry," the blousy whore had complained afterwards. "At least you could take off your dirty boots!"

"I can't, my little cheetah," he'd countered. "I might slip in altogether, if I took 'em off."

Carefully he adjusted the sight of his '08'. It was the third time it had slipped this afternoon. He squeezed the trigger. The butt smacked against his big shoulder. Up at the butts, the chessboard appeared.

Lieutenant Schwarz, who was in charge of the firing party, grunted his approval. "Another twelve, Schulze," he said. "Where the devil did you learn to shoot like that!"

"A natural talent, sir," Schulze said, not turning round and knowing that he could afford this act of *lèse-majesté*, since a whole group of NCOs and SS men had formed up in a semi-circle behind him.

Schulze tucked in the butt again, feeling the weapon like an extension of himself. He closed his left eye and took careful aim. Around him the spectators held their breath, mentally going through the movements with him.

"Another twelve," Schwarz cried, "How the devil do you do it?" But he did not attempt to answer his own question. "Listen Schulze," he said enthusiastically, "trot off to the gunnery sergeant and get yourself another ten rounds on my authority. Sergeant-Major Metzger holds the battalion shooting record – and we're gonna break it."

"Did anyone mention my name, sir?" It was the Butcher himself. He had come up with the 'goulash-cannon', which would provide 2nd Company with its midday meal that day – pea soup and sausage.

Schwarz, who found nothing wanting in the Sergeant-Major's 'national socialist attitude', as he called it, wagged his finger at the NCO. "It looks as if this green beak here'll break your record, Sergeant-Major, if you're not careful."

The Butcher forced a smile while Schulze 'trotted' over to the gunnery sergeant to sign for a further ten rounds. "Good luck to him, sir," he said with apparent casualness. "But even a blind chicken can find its corn sometimes."

"Perhaps you're right. Maybe it's a fluke. We shall see."

But the noisy protests of Schulze's comrades, who knew that he had already won the marksman's lanyard back at Sennelager, made the Butcher uneasy. "Cut it out!" he bellowed. "Let's have a bit of quiet in the knocking shop!"

Obediently they lapsed into silence as Schulze stretched himself out on the firing pad. All he needed now was a lousy five and he would have broken the Butcher's record. Schulze took very careful aim, the butt tucked into his shoulder tightly, his finger curling round the trigger. There was a dead silence. He could almost feel the couple of hundred pairs of eyes fixed on his

back. Slowly, very slowly he began to squeeze the trigger. Behind him there came the sudden clatter of a canteen falling to the ground. The single shot went whining through the air, wide of the target.

At the butts the red flag began to wave back and forth. "Fanny's drawers," Lieutenant Schwarz said sympathetically. "Hard luck, Schulze!"

The Butcher picked up his canteen. "There goes my pea soup," he grunted. His big, red face beamed at Schulze, who was rising to his feet, slapping his knees free of dirt, his eyes livid with anger. "Not bad, Schulze, not bad at all. We'll make a marksman of you yet. But you've still got to learn a bit if you want to compete with an old soldier." Throwing Schwarz an immaculate salute, he turned to fetch himself some more soup before the men could get their greedy fingers on the biggest sausages.

Schulze watched him go in silence, but at that moment he swore a silent oath. One day Sergeant-Major Metzger would pay for what he had just done – one day very soon.

***

That day came sooner than Schulze had expected. One week after the incident at the range, in March 1940, the whole battalion was suddenly alerted to move to Trier, the ancient provincial capital, to parade before the Führer himself. Hitler would be making a stop-over there on his way back from an inspection tour of the West Wall.

"Our battalion will lead the parade," the Vulture explained to his officers. The Führer has expressed a special wish to see Wotan." He turned to Schwarz, and took out his monocle to polish it. Von Dodenburg, watching his bent head, somehow had the feeling that Geier did not want them to see the look in his eyes at that moment. "Oh and by the way, Schwarz, your uncle will also be in the Führer's party. He has asked the battalion commander to request my permission to let you go that night. Naturally, I gave it forthwith."

Schwarz could not quite conceal his pride at the mention of his famous uncle. "Thank you, sir," he said. "I appreciate your kindness."

Schwarz was not alone in his appreciation of the opportunity offered by the Führer's visit: Schulze saw that it gave him the chance he had been waiting for to get into the Butcher's quarters.

On the morning of the parade, he reported sick when the duty NCO woke them at six. The NCO, who was known as 'Hole-in-the-arse' because he

had received a painful wound in his backside during the Polish campaign, looked at the naked Hamburger suspiciously. "Are you lead-swinging, Schulze?"

But Schulze's pale face and the shadows under his eyes seemed to show that he was not trying to get out of the Führer-Parade. "I've been on the thunder-box half the night, Corporal," he said weakly. "It's the trots. A couple of times I thought my back-teeth were going to go as well."

'Hole-in-the-arse' made a note in his book. "All right, you can report sick. But woe betide you if you're trying to pull my pisser!"

Senior Staff Doctor Horch, whose doctoral thesis on *Methods of Establishing Non-Aryan Racial Types by Body Smells* had gained him an immediate commission into the SS, was too busy to concern himself overly with the miserable-looking Hamburger. "Thin shit", he diagnosed, using the Germanic expression instead of the Greek word 'diarrhoea'. "Light duties, charcoal tablets and raw apple twice a day. Report to me cured tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Senior Staff Doctor!" Schulze said weakly.

Horch made a note in his records. At present he was trying to cure all illnesses with natural remedies: he'd even tried prescribing geranium leaves in the ears for toothache. When he was finished with his researches, he would present his findings to Reichsführer Himmler himself. Only one thing worried him about his project, however. The most common complaint among the young men of the Wotan Battalion was gonorrhea, against which the natural remedy of peppermint tea and raw garlic did not seem to be very effective.

Outside Schulze spat out the wad of evil-tasting tobacco which had produced the required symptoms, but the trick had been worth it. He was one step nearer his aim.

A blond-haired eighteen-year old, racked by a terrible cough, which Doctor Horch was treating with infusions of camomile tea, had been detailed to clean out the Metzger apartment. Schulze waited till they were outside the duty NCO's office, then taking out a five mark note, pressed it into the boy's hand. "Here," he said, "go over to the wet canteen, buy yourself a bottle of rum, mix yourself a couple of stiff ones with hot water and sugar and it'll do your chest more good than all the crap that cracked pill-roller is giving you."

The surprised youth accepted the note gratefully. "But what about the Butcher's apartment?" he asked after a prolonged burst of coughing.

"Leave that to me, old lad," Schulze said, picking up the carpet-beater which the duty NCO had given him for the job. "I'll take this." He grinned. "I'll give Frau Metzger's carpets the best beating they've ever had."

***

Sergeant-Major Metzger's fat, blonde wife was sitting on the sofa in the bare little living room of their apartment in the block opposite the barracks when he knocked on the door and was told to enter. On the little table at her side, a half-empty glass of Kirsch was placed within reaching distance. On her ample bosom she had balanced an open box of liqueur chocolates and was picking at them with plump white hands, licking her red-painted fingers after every one. "What do you want?" Lore Metzger said, without looking up, her attention concentrated on the sticky chocolates.

"I've come to beat your carpets, Mrs Sergeant-Major," Schulze snapped in his best military manner, standing at attention. He knew the type. In Hamburg they called them 'green widows': suburban housewives with no children, who spent their days drinking, smoking and playing with their nails, bored with the world, their husbands and themselves; their lives were empty of anything that could make them believe that they were desirable and attractive women.

"Can't you see that it's raining outside?" she said, still not looking up. "You can't beat carpets in this weather."

"Is it, Mrs Sergeant-Major?" Schulze played stupid. "Didn't notice."

"Some of you soldiers are so dumb that you have to be told to get in out of the rain," she said scornfully. She reached forward to pick up her glass of Kirsch and gave him a generous glimpse of her white, well-developed bosom, which threatened to bounce out of her low-cut peasant blouse at any moment "And the bitch knows it too," he thought to himself.

But his broad face did not reveal his feelings; it was a mask of obedient stupidity, the archetype of the dumb common soldier.

"Well, don't stand there like a spare prick at a wedding," she snapped, draining the glass. "Sit down a minute. It might stop soon."

I'll give you spare prick at a wedding, madam, he said to himself. But when he spoke his voice was full of humble gratitude for this act of great benevolence. "Thank you, Mrs Sergeant-Major, you are very kind."

He sat down on the very edge of the chair, his back rigid, his knees

close together like some timid schoolboy visiting his headmaster. She refilled her glass and for the first time looked at him properly. Deliberately he let his eyes follow the movement of the liquid from the bottle into her glass. The look worked.

"All right," she said, "you don't have to look like Jesus on the cross. Get yourself a glass. Top right in the cupboard there."

He rose hesitantly. "May I, Mrs Sergeant-Major?"

"Of course, I wouldn't say so otherwise. And for God sake, stop calling me Mrs Sergeant-Major!"

After that things went off in great style, as Schulze had planned they would; after all he had played out this little scene a good half-hundred times in the last ten years since he had had his first experience at the age of fourteen with the mother of his best pal at school.

They talked about the weather. Then it was the SS. Another glass of Kirsch. Carefully he steered her around to her own life with the Sergeant-Major. Undoubtedly it must be a lonely life being married to such an important but busy man as Sergeant-Major Metzger? It was. "If you only knew just how lonely," Lore Metzger sighed with all the repressed desire of her fat bored romantic soul. Another Kirsch.

As if by accident, he touched her fat knee as he handed her the glass. She shivered with desire. He gave her a few moments more, then placed his big muscular arm round her shoulders, as if it were the most natural thing to do in the world. Through the thin blouse he felt her firm flesh, hot and slightly damp. He put his hand inside her blouse and toyed with her nipple.

She closed her eyes and sighed, "What must you think of me?"

He made as if to take his hand away, but she grabbed it quickly and placed it back on the erect nipple. He shrugged and planted his lips on hers. Their tongues met and intertwined like two snakes. Over her naked shoulder he caught a glimpse of the Butcher sitting proudly on a white horse in his pre-war black uniform. Schulze winked at the photograph cheekily, then turned his mind to the job in hand.

A few minutes later her brassiere and panties lay on the carpet, as she tip-toed to the door, clad only in her black silk stockings, and locked it. Carefully, so that she wouldn't alarm her neighbour by the sudden noise, she lowered the shutters.

He had her the first time on the couch. Afterwards she scampered away giggling to the bathroom. As she ran by, he slapped her ample bottom with

his big hard hand, more with pleasure than revenge, and said to the photograph, "One!"

The next time he had her in the matrimonial bed. She objected a little, but not much. For him the squeaking of the springs and the wooden protesting of the frame were like music: the tangible accompaniment to his act of revenge. "Two!"

The third time he made her do things that "I've never even done for the Sergeant-Major – and I've been married to him for ten years. I never even seen things like that in the books he confiscates from the soldiers – the dirty pigs!"

Schulze knew he needed to play with her no longer. He grabbed her by her long blonde hair and forced her down on him. Thereafter there was only pleasurable silence. "Three," he whispered.

***

It was three o'clock that afternoon when he left her apartment, the unused carpet beater under his arm. She was asleep on the rumpled bed, a look of complete satisfaction on her fat face. It was matched by the one on Schulze's face, though there was a hint of malice in his smile.

Slowly and a little painfully – he had a faint nagging pain between his legs, which he guessed, wrongly, could only come from one cause – he made his way over the road towards the entrance to the Adolf Hitler Barracks, where the trucks were beginning to unload the men returning from the parade.

"You," a voice bellowed.

Surprised, he turned round and snapped to attention, the carpet beater held at his side like a rifle.

It was Sergeant-Major Metzger in full uniform. "I thought you were sick?" he said accusingly. "Where have you been with that?" He indicated the carpet-beater.

"The MO gave me light duties, Sergeant-Major," Schulze snapped in his best military manner. "I was over at your apartment beating the carpets for Mrs Sergeant-Major Metzger."

The Butcher's surly manner relaxed a little. It had been a long strenuous day in the rain at Trier and he was tired. All he wanted now was to get his clothes off and have a drink. If Schulze had done the heavy work, perhaps

Lore wouldn't be too tired this evening. It would be a change. After all, love was the bread of the poor man, he told himself, using a phrase he had picked up from some film or other. "Well, did you beat them properly? My wife's particular, you know."

"You can rely on me, Sergeant-Major," he answered promptly. "I gave the carpets a real going-over. They'll stay beat for a good few days to come." He saluted and passed on quickly before the NCO could see the look of triumph in his blue eyes.

CHAPTER 5

In Trier that same evening Lieutenant Kurt Schwarz also experienced a moment of triumph when he met his uncle again after six years and the great man decided to spend the evening with him.

His uncle jerked an elegant hand at the door of his office and said in a high, nasal voice. "Out, Müller!" Obediently the shaven-headed Chief of the Gestapo got to his feet. "You, too, Nebe." The Head of the Criminal Police followed his colleague to the door. There they turned and snapped to attention.

"Heil Hitler, Obergruppenführer!" they shouted in unison.

Their chief stared at them. "Tonight," he announced as if he were making an official statement, "I am going to talk politics to Kurt here. Then we are going to get gloriously drunk. And after that," – he stuck his thumb between his two fingers obscenely – "we're going to find what this God-forsaken papist dump has to offer a man in the way of pleasure. Understood?"

"Understood, Senior Group Leader," they bellowed. They had understood all right. Senior Group Leader Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the Reich Main Security Office, feared throughout Germany as 'Hangman Heydrich', was going to go on one of his celebrated binges, and they were thankful they were not being asked to go along with him; for in his cups, the tall blond SS General, with the delicate hands of a violinist (which he was) and the ice-cold eyes of a killer (which he was too), were even more dangerous than normal.

When they had gone, Heydrich swung his gleaming boots on to the table, pulled over a bottle of cognac and poured himself a stiff drink. He shoved the bottle towards his nephew. "Help yourself, Kurt," he said.

Without waiting for his nephew, he rapped "no heel taps" and downed the contents in one gulp. "Push the bottle over," he said and in the same breath, "Well, how are you liking your service in Assault Battalion Wotan?"

Kurt, still a little awed by his famous uncle, sketched in a few details about the 2nd Company. Heydrich listened attentively, drinking all the while, apparently not even noticing that he was doing so. "And the spirit among the soldiers?"

"Excellent."

"And the officers?"

Schwarz hesitated, and then shrugged. "There are some who are not hard enough," he began.

"Senior Lieutenant Kuno von Dodenburg for example?" Heydrich said softly. He laughed at the expression on his nephew's face. "Our informers are everywhere, my dear Kurt," he explained. "I could tell you some fine things about your little Captain Geier too. It is not only horses he likes to ride, believe you me. But I won't: it might shock your sensitive young soul. You see, Kurt, my police force embraces every aspect of the nation's life. I need information about everyone so that I can correct and direct the people's thoughts. It is only in this way that we can eliminate everything foreign and therefore destructive from the national thinking. The police as a purifier and the educator of the Greater German Nation – that is my aim!" For a moment his eyes sparkled fanatically. Then he took another deep drink of cognac and swung his boots off the table top. "But come on, young Kurt, let us not waste any more time. We shall see what the most catholic city of Trier, old when Rome was young as the locals boast, has to offer two high-spirited soldiers."

As he waited for his big black Mercedes to pull up outside the hotel, he nudged Kurt Schwarz familiarly. "Did you hear the one about the two nuns and the blood sausage?" he began, and launched into the first of many obscene jokes that the young Lieutenant would hear from his uncle that night.

***

"*Close the streets, the SS marches,*

The storm-columns stand at the ready,"

Reinhard Heydrich stumbled and nearly fell in the dark hotel corridor.

"Shush Uncle – everybody's sleeping!" Schwarz urged. But the Head of the Reich's Main Security Office was passed caring.

"Let death be our battle companion! We are the Black Band," he howled drunkenly.

Finally Schwarz managed to get his uncle through the door of his suite and sighed gratefully as he closed it behind him with the heel of his boot. He let Heydrich slump into an armchair and opened his shirt at the neck. Somehow he'd got the blind drunk Chief of Germany's security system back to his hotel without incident. He had never spent such a boozy evening in his whole life, even during his cadet days at Bad Toelz. His uncle had been

drinking solidly for six hours: cognac, gin, whisky, wine – everything and anything alcoholic. His stomach must be made of cast iron.

Suddenly Heydrich lurched to his feet. "Got to piss," he said drunkenly. With one hand stretched out in front of him like that of a blind man, he staggered to the bathroom.

Schwarz slumped in the chair he had just vacated and stretched out his jackbooted legs in front of him gratefully. God, what wouldn't he give now for a bed! He felt he could sleep for the next forty-eight hours without waking. Sleepily he closed his eyes. His chest began to rise and fall gently.

But Lieutenant Schwarz was fated not to sleep much that night. Suddenly a shot rang out. He sat bolt upright in his chair. The noise had come from the bathroom. He jumped to his feet and ran across the room.

His uncle was staring at his reflection in the shattered mirror, one hand holding the basin, the other holding his service pistol which trembled dangerously. Slowly he grimaced at himself in the broken glass. "Now I've got you, you Jewish scum!" he said.

Schwarz looked at him aghast. His uncle looked completely sober. "What did you say?" he asked.

Heydrich turned round. "Jewish scum, I said." He laughed, but there was no mirth in his laughter.

"What do you mean, Uncle?" Schwarz persisted.

"It is perfectly simple, my dear Kurt," Heydrich said, his voice clear and unslurred now. "Your father and I are Jewish. Your grandmother was called Suess, Sarah Suess, and I am sure your studies in racial anthropology and genealogy at Bad Toelz will tell you what that means – the Heydrich family is Jewish!"

"*Jewish?*"

Heydrich looked down at his nephew mockingly. "Yes, we are both Yids."

CHAPTER 6

The winter of 1939-40, the hardest in living memory, slowly gave way to spring. The black poplars that bordered the Adolf Hitler Barracks began to turn green. Now when the NCOs weren't looking, the 2nd Company men slowed down. In winter they had moved quickly of their own volition, to keep warm. But spring was here and it was getting too warm to do everything at the double as Sergeant-Major Metzger wanted. "Heaven, arse and twine," they grumbled, "he'd have you go for a crap at the double if he had his way!"

The spring also seemed to have brought an end to the long *sitzkrieg* in the West. At 5.20 am precisely on 9 April 1940, the troopship *Hansestadt Danzig* sailed into Copenhagen, filled with German troops, to be directed to its berth by General Kurt Himer, the head of the German task force, who had arrived in the Danish capital two days before in civilian clothes. It was all too easy. Denmark surrendered before the day was out at a cost of twenty German casualties.

Norway was next, though this time the enemy resisted more strongly. The headlines of the Führer's own newspaper *Voelkische Beobachter* and the Rhenish *Westdeutsche Beobachter,* which were available in the troops' day rooms, were full of news of the battles around Narvik, Trondheim and Fornebu, and the heroic deeds of General Dietl's Bavarian mountain troops.

New equipment started to pour into the Adolf Hitler Barracks that month, indicating to the men of the 2nd Company that their baptism of fire would come soon. Their old trucks and horse-drawn transport disappeared to be replaced by gleaming new half-tracks. Every platoon received one of the deadly MG 42 machine guns with its air-cooled mechanism that enabled it to fire 800 rounds a minute. And on the very day that morning drill was interrupted so that they could hear the special announcement from the Führer's Headquarters that Narvik had fallen, they received their first consignment of flame throwers. The men of the 2nd Company looked at each other significantly, as the demonstration team from the Army's Special Weapon Office began to unload their deadly freight. "Close combat weapons," they whispered among themselves. "This is going to be a close combat job!"

***

The burly NCO in charge of the three-man demonstration team, allotted to the 2nd Company, tapped the round pack of fuel on the soldier's back. "This is the core of the team, he said heavily. "But it's damn sensitive, believe you me. One slug just glancing off that thing and it's goodnight Marie."

The 2nd Company laughed dutifully, but without conviction.

"So, what do we do?" The NCO answered his own question. "We give the man with the flame thrower the best protection we can. That's what numbers two and three are for." He pointed to the two infantry soldiers, heavily laden with assault rifles and grenades, standing like two plates from an Army instructional manual.

He cleared his throat. "All right, that's the objective, that bunker." He pointed to the mock pillbox some fifty metres away. "How do we take it?"

Without waiting for an answer, number two started to crawl forward towards the bunker from the left, a smoke grenade clasped in his right hand. Number three, in his turn, dropped to the ground, feet spread apart at the prescribed angle and began to blaze away with blank ammunition at the pillbox's firing slot.

Suddenly the man with the grenades held up his hand. The number three stopped firing at once and the man threw his grenade. There was a sharp crack like a dry twig breaking underfoot on a hot summer's day and the pillbox was enveloped in thick grey smoke. The rifleman jumped to his feet and placed himself at the side of the man with the flame thrower, lining himself up on the number one as if it was some kind of drill movement.

The NCO blew his whistle. They doubled forward into the smoke, which was clearing rapidly. The rifleman fired from the hip as he ran to the left of the man with the flame-thrower, but the observers from the 2nd Company noted he was careful to keep a little behind. A second later they saw why.

The number one pressed the trigger of his terrible weapon. A hissing tongue of flame shot forward. It wrapped itself around the mock pillbox. Little bubbles of paint spurted up on the woodwork. The air was filled with the stink of burned wood and scorched grass.

The NCO looked at them in silence. Even after two dozen such demonstrations, he could not quite overcome the mood of awe which descended upon him after the flame thrower had done its work. "If that had

been the real thing, any living creature within twenty metres would have had its lungs collapsed through lack of oxygen – and anything hit by the flame itself would have been burned away to one half of its size. Look like little black pigmies they tell me," he added thoughtfully, almost as if he were talking to himself.

***

The arrival of the flame throwers was followed by intensive house-to-house fighting, carried out in one of the local hamlets, hurriedly evacuated at the battalion commander's order for this purpose. Time and again they practised the same old drill for taking a house – a burst of sub-machine gun fire along the line of the windows to make its occupants duck, the door flung open, the stick grenade lobbed inside, the muffled crump of its explosion, the door open again and the final burst of sub-machine gun fire to take care of any survivors.

"Shit on the Christmas tree!" Schulze cursed, as Lieutenant von Dodenburg ordered his platoon to prepare to go through the drill yet one more time, "I don't think I'll ever be able to go through a door again without throwing an egg through it!" He wiped the sweat off his brow. "If this goes on, I'm going to present a danger to society – real antisocial."

Kuno von Dodenburg put on his helmet again and picked up his Schmeisser machine pistol. "Schulze," he said, "you've been a danger to society ever since your old man conceived you. Come on, let's go."

But Captain Geier was not prepared to follow the battalion commander's training schedule blindly. Privately he thought that Major Hartmann wouldn't survive the campaign to come. In spite of his name the Battalion Commander wasn't hard enough. For one thing he had a wife and children – always a bad sign in a professional soldier, in the Vulture's opinion. Besides Hartmann was too conventional; he did not expect the unexpected, like being faced with an opponent when one was not armed oneself.

Accordingly, after he had discovered to his delight that one of his NCOs had been in the pre-war police where he had learned the basic elements of ju-jitsu, the Vulture ordered that every man in the Second Company should learn the rudiments of unarmed combat. He was the first to undergo the course himself: a laughable little figure in his overlong shorts,

dwarfed by the hulking ex-policeman. He found it very stimulating, apart from the basic stimulation of being close to another semi-nude sweating male body. But that was another and private matter, which was to be relegated to the back of his mind like the fading French postcards of naked boys were to the back of his dresser. "Gentlemen," he told his officers at their Monday morning conference with which he began each week, "I want blind, fearless obedience. If I told you to jump out of that window, I would expect you to immediately, even though we are three floors up." He screwed his monocle tighter into his right eye. "And obedience is based on complete confidence in oneself. Hence I want my men to go through this course, every one of them. I can assure you that when they are finished, they will be afraid of no enemy in this world."

***

"The weakest spot in a man's body," the ex-policeman lectured them, "is his balls. If you can get him there, he's had it. Get that?"

"Yes sergeant," they replied in chorus.

"Now then, if you can get away with it with some Tommy or Frog, all right. But what are you going to do, if they try it on you?" He raised a big sausage-like finger in warning. "That's the catch, isn't it?"

"Yes sergeant," they chorused again obediently.

"However," he continued, "there is a defensive measure which I am going to reveal to you now. You, Schulze, I want you to try to kick me in the balls."

"Kick you in the balls Sergeant!" Schulze breathed in mock indignation. "But you're an NCO!"

"Don't worry your poor little brain about that, Schulze. I can take care of myself, believe you me. And don't be surprised if you're lying on your big fat arse in just a couple of seconds' time."

"Are you sure, Sergeant?" Schulze asked.

"Of course, I'm sure. In fact, I'm ordering you to try and kick me in the balls."

"Well, if that's the way it is, Sergeant, here we go!" Schulze streaked forward with surprising speed for such a big man. The NCO raised his hands to ward off the blow. Schulze sprang into the air. Like one of the pre-war stars of the Hamburg *St Pauli* football team he twisted in mid-air. The NCO

was completely fooled. His hands grabbed and missed. The next instant he was lying crumpled on the floor, his chin covered in vomit, writhing from side to side.

"Do you think I should have told him I was the champion of the Barmbek Socialist Club's ju-jitsu team?" Schulze asked innocently.

And that was the end of the Vulture's attempts to turn his 2nd Company into expert unarmed combat fighters. But by now their CO had other things on his mind than the failure of his training programme. Time was running out, and the Company would have to carry out their assignment without the benefit of unarmed combat. On the evening of the last day of April, he ordered a company 'comrade evening'. He personally would provide two forty-eight litre casks of beer, while the other officers would purchase two dozen bottles of corn schnapps out of their own pockets.

The announcement, made by Sergeant-Major Metzger, was received with loud cheers from the men of the 2nd Company. But Schulze was not impressed. His elation at putting the ex-policeman out of action – the man was down-graded once he had recovered and transferred to some rear echelon unit – had vanished. His reaction to the announcement was a surly, "Listen, when the gentlemen officers buy us common folk beer and schnapps, you can bet your last penny, the balloon's about to go up!"

And, as was usually the case, Schulze was not too far wrong.

CHAPTER 7

"Meine Herren," Captain Geier rasped in his unmistakable Prussian voice, "in a few moments we shall be going over to the men for the comrade evening." He tightened his grip on his monocle and stared at them – von Dodenburg, Schwarz, Kaufmann, whose father was a wealthy industrialist in the Ruhr, and young Fick, with his unfortunate name: a crude term for sexual intercourse. "I don't know your capacity for alcohol. All I expect from you is that you behave yourselves as gentlemen and officers."

Schwarz looked at his CO with undisguised disgust. Underneath his cold cynical exterior, the Vulture was basically a bourgeois. Although he wore the uniform of the Führer's own Black Guards, he had no real understanding of the national revolution which had taken place under Adolf Hitler's leadership since 1933. In essence, Captain Geier was no better than the 'March Violets' who had flooded to join the National Socialist Party in the spring of that great year of German renewal, hoping to get on the bandwagon before it was too late.

The Vulture was no fool. He saw and understood Schwarz's look of contempt. *You wait, my boy,* he promised Schwarz mentally, *I'll have those breeches off you yet, Uncle Heydrich or no Uncle Heydrich!* But he was too wise a man to say the words. Instead he raised his glass of schnapps until it was level with the third button of his jacket, as military custom prescribed. Elbow at a ninety degree angle to his chest, he barked, "Meine Herren – Prost!"

"Prost!" they answered as one.

Like automatons, they raised their glasses, drank their drinks in one gulp and placed the empty glasses down on the table with a bang, all at exactly the same moment.

The Vulture nodded his appreciation. The uniformity of the movement pleased him, as did all uniformity. Admittedly they weren't cavalry officers and Schwarz and Kaufmann weren't gentlemen, but each one of them was a leader, a useful man in the battle soon to come. He cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, I think it is time we went over to the men!"

Sergeant-Major Metzger had taken on the responsibility of decorating the room himself. The rough wooden tables were arranged in a great

horseshoe and covered with grey blankets. At the head of the horseshoe there was a wooden armchair for the Vulture and ordinary chairs for his officers and the Sergeant-Major, with the normal dining-room benches extending to left and right for the men. At regular intervals there was a bottle of schnapps, surrounded by a cluster of little glasses; and before each individual seat there was a grey stone beer mug. Around the walls the men had nailed up pine branches stolen from the nearby state forest during the morning exercise. Now, as the Captain and his party entered, the men stood stiffly to attention behind their places. With pleasure the Vulture noted that a transformation had taken place in them in these few months. They seemed to have grown into their uniforms, which had long since lost their newness. Their faces were harder now and thinner, so that the eyes appeared to stand out more. They had learned a new code of conduct, where the concept of right and wrong was absolute and rigid; and they had learned it at the cost of cold, misery, and in some cases, at the cost of their own blood. Now they no longer looked like civilians masquerading as soldiers. They were trained soldiers, who lacked only one essential – the bloody experience of battle.

The Sergeant-Major gave the officers a magnificent salute. At the top of his voice, he bellowed. "Second Company, SS Assault Battalion Wotan present for comrade evening, sir!"

The Vulture touched his gloved hand casually to his cap. "Thank you, Sergeant-Major. Please stand the men at ease."

There was an uneasy shuffling of feet. "Break out the schnapps," Metzger shouted officiously.

Hurriedly the glasses were passed round, the caps screwed off the bottles and the schnapps poured into them. The Vulture took off his big peaked cap and accepted a glass. He raised it rigidly to the third button of his tunic. "Comrades," he rasped, "to us, the ones we love and the Second Company!"

"To us, the ones we love and the Second Company!" nearly two hundred voices bellowed so that the wooden beams rang to the sound.

"No heel taps!"

They finished their drink in one gulp, one or two of the younger ones, who had already filled their stomachs with olive oil and dry cheese for the ordeal, coughing as the Korn burned its way down their throats.

Geier sat down. The company followed with a noisy scraping back of the benches. "Sergeant-Major," he ordered, "the company wit. A joke – a

juicy one, please."

"Schulze!" the Butcher yelled across the wooden table at the Hamburger. "All right comedian, tell a joke – and you heard the Captain – a juicy one!"

Schulze did not hesitate. "What did the soldier say to his wife after he had come home on leave for the first time in six months?"

"Well, what did he say?"

Schulze tugged at the end of his big nose. He said, "Take a good look at the floor, darling, because you're only going to be seeing the ceiling for the next forty-eight hours!"

A wave of laughter ran down the table.

"Excellent, Schulze," the Vulture said, pulling at his collar and accepting another schnapps. Now here's a really juicy one. Did you hear about the two warm brothers sailing through the Kaiser-Wilhelm Canal..."

The comrade evening was under way.

***

The evening had degenerated into a noisy drunken confusion of voices, each trying to outbid the other in volume, letting off steam for the first time in months.

"Yer wrong," they said, "it's not that the Frogs is bad shots. It's because they aim at your balls. They're after making you into a singing tenor."

"Well, with balls like yours, it'd be like aiming a 75mm cannon at a barn door!"

"Watch that shitty beer mug. You'll have it all over my uniform!"

"Once you've got your hand there, they can't resist anymore. Anybody knows that. The little man in the boat, that's the one you've got to tickle if you want them on their backs, ready and waiting for it."

"So this feller shut him up right smartish. Right in front of everybody he got up and said at the top of his voice, 'You've got to excuse my friend. He's just had an unfortunate love affair.' Of course everybody was waiting to know what the love affair was. And so he said, 'Yes, he broke the wrist of his right hand last week!' Jesus Christ, you should have heard the silence!"

"This recruit pulled out the nail and said to the kitchen bull, 'Look sergeant, a nail!' and the kitchen bull asked, 'What kinda nail – human or the one you knock in wood?' 'The kind you knock in wood!' So the kitchen bull

said, all cool, calm and collected, 'Get it down you, soldier, it'll put iron in yer!'"

So the evening progressed: an endless, confused parade of old jokes, beer, traditional soldiers' lore, beer, complaints, beer, snatches of dirty songs, beer, all punctuated by sudden dashes to the latrines to get rid of the excess liquid.

***

"Let me tell you, Lieutenant Schwarz," the Butcher said drunkenly, towering over the little officer, a beer mug in one hand a glass of schnapps in the other, "I can even smell a Yid!" He waved one hand, as if to ward off a protest and spilled some of his beer on Schwarz's gleaming boots. The officer did not even notice.

"Everybody knows they smell different to us. That's why the MO sticks his nose in your armpit during the medical." He nodded his big head significantly. "You see they've been trained at university to recognise a Yid's smell at once. But me, I don't need training. I grew up with them." He glowered suddenly. "Bastards with plenty of money. A smart, greasy lot, always after the girls – our girls. They like white meat, you know."

"Is that so?" Schwarz said drunkenly, finding it difficult not to slur the three simple words, and deciding it would be better, if he tried them again. "Is that so?"

"Naturally, Lieu- Lieutenant," the Butcher said significantly and took another deep drink of his beer, following it with a chaser of schnapps. "They'd do anything for white meat. Our blonde German girls fas- fascinate them, you see. But they never... marry them. Couldn't even then, even before our Führer came to power. Where I used to live as a lad, they used to say that the Rabbi would threaten to dock it off altogether with his knife if they said they wanted to marry a... a German girl."

Schwarz's mouth dropped open incredulously. "Is that so?" he breathed, more confident in his vocabulary this time.

The Butcher leered at him. "It is Lieutenant. As if them Yiddish tails hadn't been chopped short enough as it is, eh!"

***

"Look here, Schulze," von Dodenburg said a little angrily, "an army can only function efficiently when an order is carried out unconditionally."

"Even a stupid order?" the other asked with the dogged persistence of the drunk. "A stupid one, Lieutenant?"

"There are no stupid orders, Schulze. They may appear stupid to you soldiers. But you are the recipients and you can't really judge, can you?"

"But what about that captain in the 1st Company who ordered his driver to jump out of the window – and the silly arsehole did and broke his leg?" Schulze persisted. "What did that prove, sir?"

"It proved that the soldier in question had absolute confidence in his officer."

"Well, I don't look at it like that, sir," Schulze said. "It seems to me that it ain't any different to the old cadaver obedience of the Kaiser's day that my Dad used to tell me about. Absolute unthinking obedience like that gets a man killed." He took a deep drink of his beer.

Eagerly von Dodenburg seized on the expression. "Cadaver obedience! No, you're completely wrong there, Schulze. There's nothing like it in our training. The leadership of the SS wouldn't tolerate it. General Berger's theories are absolutely to the contrary." Full of drunken enthusiasm he began to lecture Schulze on the Duke of Swabia's principles of military training.

***

Standing in the middle of the noisy room, stroking his big nose and looking, with his completely bald head, more like a vulture than ever, Captain Geier felt happy, or as happy as he could ever feel. Around him were the young men of his company, their faces were still unlined by the marks of corruption, unlike those of the painted youngsters he was forced to have recourse to in Berlin.

These young men looked good. For a moment he allowed himself to muse on what they must look like naked – hard, muscular young bodies, unlike the soft effete bodies of the young men cruising the dark streets behind Berlin's Lehrter Station. Then he dismissed the thought as unworthy.

Duty is duty, he told himself, using the old service phrase, *and schnapps is schnapps. And the two should not be mixed.* The beautiful boys were part of another world and nothing to do with his military existence.

A 'beer corpse' passed, borne by six giggling, drunken soldiers. They

had placed the drunk on one of the benches and were bearing him towards the latrines. "We're going to give him a state funeral, sir," one of the bearers told the Captain excitedly. The Vulture smiled thinly and touched his hand to his forehead in salute, as was expected from him. The procession passed on, a drunken parody of the real thing.

The Vulture took one last look at his company. "My company," he whispered softly to himself and felt tears come to his eyes, as he wondered how many of these handsome young men, the elite of the nation, would survive what was to come.

He pulled himself together and pushed his way through the crowd. "Sergeant-Major," he snapped in his customary nasal voice.

The Butcher, his face as red as beetroot, his eyes gleaming with drink, swung round drunkenly and, swaying badly, tried to assume the position of attention.

Captain Geier waved to him to desist. "Not here, Sergeant-Major," he said. "I just wanted to tell you that the officers are leaving now. It is better that we leave the men to get on with it." He took one last look around him, as if he were trying to register their faces for some private roll of honour; "Good night, Sergeant-Major," he said and touched his hand to his cap before striding out, followed by his officers, who trotted after him like drunken puppies.

The victims continued their celebration.

***

He had picked her up under the thin blue light of the blacked-out street lamp after following the tap-tap of the high-heeled shoes on the wet cobbles with drunken persistence. As he had been unable to see her face on. the way to her apartment, his attention had been concentrated on running his hands up and down her body under the gleaming black mac.

But now he saw that she was beautiful, her eyes a deep black under the short curly hair, her face a smooth sweet oval. He could almost believe that she was unspoiled and innocent.

But she wasn't. The cunning expert kisses she gave him told even his drunken brain that.

Yet he was too drunk and too eager to care any longer. His hands followed the seam of her silk stocking, searching for the white skin above,

smooth, firm and utterly enchanting.

Violently he pushed her on her back. Automatically her legs flew open. He caught a glimpse of that dark hairy flower, set deep in its wet V. He bored his hard body into hers, and suddenly he had forgotten the world of men, with its jackboots, crisp orders, steel monsters, and its smell of impending death.

As he slept exhausted, his blond hair matted damply to his forehead, the unknown woman stroked the back of his neck with infinite compassion.

***

Schwarz wandered blindly through the blacked-out town. A fat middle-aged policeman spotted him as he staggered into the blue light cast by the street lamp. Officiously he clapped his hand on his duty pistol, but when he saw the officer's stars and the silver gleam of the SS runes he turned and strode hurriedly away in the other direction.

Schwarz staggered on. The town was blacked-out perfectly. But behind every shuttered window he seemed to sense music, happy voices, laughter. They made him feel sad – that heartbreaking maudlin sadness of the drunk, whom no one loves in the whole wide world. Schwarz felt empty. He had no friends, no comrades even, only superiors and subordinates. No girl to love him – not even one of the cheap whores that the men lined up to visit in the house behind the barracks. He was completely, utterly, irrevocably alone in this world.

Suddenly he found himself looking up at a tall un-German building that had the appearance of a church, but wasn't one. Its boarded-up door and broken windows, which had not been opened these two years or more stared back at him blankly. His unsteady gaze fell on the swastika painted on the door and the bold red letters "Jews Out!" Then he realised, with a feeling of disgust and fascination, that he was standing in front of the local synagogue, which had obviously suffered the fate of all German Jewish churches during the 'Crystal Night' of 1938!

On impulse he staggered up the steps, still littered with glass from that terrible night when the Trier SA had come in their official cars, had pulled off the Rabbi's Iron Cross from the First War, which he had thought would protect him from their anger, and strung him up in the square. It had taken him twenty minutes to die. Schwarz's shoulder pushed against the door which gave immediately, as it had done that November night when the jack-booted

SA troopers had come in yelling at the tops of their voices to plunder the place of worship, urinating in the sacred places, destroying what they could not take with them, egged on by the screams of the crowd outside.

Schwarz stood swaying in the interior, illuminated only by the light of the stars which shone through the hole in the roof.

He searched the littered floor for a stone and flung it at the nearest wall. It clattered to the ground somewhere in the shadows. "I'm not a Jew," he screamed. "Do you hear? I'm not a Jew." His cry against the dirty trick that fate had played on him was swallowed up in the furthest recesses of the bat-infested roof. "Jew," it mocked him. "Jew, Jew, Jew, Jew." He clapped his hands over his ears and tried to block out the accusing word.

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In the seclusion of his bedroom, behind a locked door, Captain Geier leafed through his well-worn collection of photos, staring at the young male bodies, while the ancient upright clock which he had inherited from his father ticked away the minutes of his life.

CHAPTER 8

"Gentlemen, we march! In ten days at the latest, seven at the earliest!"

The Vulture sat back on the mounted cavalry saddle which served him as an office chair and stared at their earnest faces with pleasure. The announcement had had the expected effect.

"Where to, sir?" von Dodenburg asked.

"I am afraid that I cannot tell you that – on express orders from the Battalion CO who was at Army Group with the rest of the battalion commanders this morning. The Führer, in his wisdom, has decreed that individual targets will not be told to those assigned to them until the very last moment. My guess is that I shall be able to tell you in a couple of days' time."

"But sir," von Dodenburg protested. "We've got to know something. General Berger says –"

"I know what General Berger says," the Vulture interrupted him. "We of the old Officers Corps," he emphasised the word 'old', "know only too well what his opinions are. However, if I cannot give you any details about your immediate assignment, I can sketch in the general situation, as explained by the battalion commander."

Striding over to the big map of Western Europe on the wall, he tapped it with his riding cane. "The Western Front. For over seven months now, over a million men have been facing each other on a front of five hundred kilometres from the Swiss border to the so-called English Channel, with hardly a shot being fired for all that time. Last year when we invaded Poland, the Anglo-French forces missed their opportunity of hitting us while our West Wall was devoid of our best troops. Now it is time that the forces of Greater Germany show the enemy how to conduct a campaign. But where?"

Thoughtfully he tapped the map with his cane. "Here in Alsace in the Belfort Gap, a classic invasion route, which I am sure you are all familiar with – even those of you who slept through the military history classes at Bad Toelz. But the Belfort Gap is covered by the French Maginot Line. As is the Lorraine Gap around Metz-Verdun." He tapped the map a little higher up. "But it is also protected by some of France's most effective and powerful fortifications. So what is left to us?"

Von Dodenburg nodded to the shaded area of neutral Belgium. "The

Losheim Gap between Aachen and Prum."

The Vulture beamed appreciatively. "I see you didn't sleep through the military history lectures, von Dodenburg," he said. "Of course; the third of the classic invasion routes into France's northern plain. But, naturally, it has one great disadvantage."

Schwarz clicked his heels together, as if he were an officer cadet again and barked. "Highly unsuitable country for modern warfare, sir. The road system is inadequate for a modern motorised army and the terrain is wooded and most suitable for armoured formations, which undoubtedly will be the spearhead of any German force attacking westwards."

The Vulture nodded his approval. "Highly commendable, Schwarz. We will make a general staff officer of you yet. Your words reflect the opinion of the German General Staff – almost to the man." He hesitated and von Dodenburg thought he saw the faint shadow of a cynical smile cross his CO's ugly, birdlike face. "In his wisdom, the Führer had decided, however, that this will be the area in which the bulk of our forces will attack."

"In the Ardennes, sir?" they asked, almost as one. "But that's impossible!"

He held up his cane for silence and screwed his monocle more firmly in his eye. "Gentlemen, I am surprised at you! Nothing is impossible for the Führer." Again von Dodenburg sensed the CO's underlying cynicism. "You, as National Socialist officers, should know that, even more than an un-political chap like myself, who has never voted in an election in his whole life. And God forbid that I will ever have to either." He paused. "Anyway let me explain our plan."

He tapped the Low Countries on the big map. "The obvious method of avoiding the French Maginot Line would be to sweep through Belgium as we did in 1914. But it is so obvious that the British and French general staffs, who are not noted for their intelligence or insight, plan to oppose such an opening gambit by moving the bulk of the Anglo-French forces into Belgium.

"In other words," he continued, "the enemy expects us to come through Belgium. The question that the Führer must have asked himself is, *Where does the enemy expect us to attack?*" He tapped the Ardennes area with his cane. "Definitely not here. As a result it is the Führer's intention to make a feint with his right wing so that the enemy will start rushing into Belgium. As soon as that movement is underway, the bulk of our armoured forces will strike through the Ardennes. The tankers will crack through the French here

at Sedan." He indicated the legendary city on the Franco-Belgian border, which had seen the greatest triumph of Prussian arms in the Franco-Prussian War and had led to the creation of the German national state. "With Sedan taken, our armour will head west along the north bank of the Somme for the Channel." He hesitated momentarily and when he spoke again all the cynicism had vanished from his voice to be replaced by scarcely concealed tension and excitement. "And, gentle, men, if we can bring that movement off, it will be the end of the Anglo-French armies and the greatest victory of German arms ever. Perhaps even the greatest victory that any one nation has ever won."

***

The next forty-eight hours were given over to careful last-minute preparations for the battle to come. It seemed as if Assault Battalion Wotan held a different parade every second hour to check some piece of equipment or other, from paybooks to ascertain if every soldier had received the requisite number of injections for field service, to a major all-night inspection of the half tracks which would carry them into battle.

In the midst of this anxious preparation for sudden death, there were some who had other more personal business to occupy them – Sergeant-Major Metzger, for instance.

Three days after the 'comrade evening', the Butcher had felt a painful burning sensation when he urinated in the morning. It was as if a hot rod were being thrust slowly up his penis. Then the pain passed away and in the hectic atmosphere of the company office, he forgot about it, until three hours later when he had drunk his 11 o'clock 'half litre' and had made his way to the NCOs' latrine to enjoy his usual long sit over the *Volkischer Beobachter*. But this particular morning, there was no pleasure to be had for Sergeant-Major Metzger. He had hardly let down his immaculate field-grey trousers and begun to urinate when he was forced to hold on to the wall in excruciating pain, the sweat standing out in great opaque beads on his crimson face, the liquid squirting out of him in five different directions.

The Butcher had been in the Army long enough to know what he had got. But where? Not from Fat Barbara, the whore he usually frequented in the establishment behind the barracks; he hadn't been to her place for three months now. In fact, he hadn't been with any woman except his wife in that

period. And he didn't believe it was possible to get the disease from a latrine seat as some of the older NCOs still persisted in believing.

Lore then? That was impossible! Something must have happened on the night the Company got drunk. But what? He had a vague memory of talking to Lieutenant Schwarz about the Yids, but after that his mind was completely blank.

That midday he didn't go home, although he knew that Lore had cooked his favourite meal of sauerkraut and pig's knuckle. The senior NCOs of the other companies, who preferred to take their dinner in liquid form in the wet canteen, made pointed remarks about his saving it up till Lore had 'warmed up supper' for him in front of the oven. But he ignored them; he was too preoccupied with his attempts to discover what he had done on the night of the company drinking session. Nobody seemed to know.

Puzzled, he returned to the company office. But he could not sit still. Every five minutes he would rise to go to the NCOs latrine, where he would slip down his pants and examine his penis. Now a thin yellowish pus oozed out of it when he squeezed it.

In the office, the two clerks winked at each other knowingly every time he disappeared. "The Butcher's got the shits," they whispered to each other. "He knows we're going on active service. I bet the bastard's going to spin that cracked pill-roller some sort of tale so that he can get out of going with us."

And to some extent the movement order, which the Butcher knew now rested in the company safe, did play a part in his calculations. If he did report sick, he knew that he would not have to go into action with the Battalion – and the Butcher was very much concerned with the safety of his own hide. But if he did report sick, he knew that the Vulture would ensure that that would be the end of his military career. A suspicious bastard like the Vulture would immediately suspect he had infected himself to get out of the dangers which lay before them. Before the day would be out, he would be reduced to the ranks, transferred to a military prison hospital and from there eventually to one of the dreaded punishment battalions.

In the end, the Butcher decided to go to a doctor, but not to the Battalion MO with his idiotic nature cures. Instead, he borrowed the company cycle and pedalled into the little garrison town to visit the local doctor, *Dr Med* Hans Friderichs.

The aged local doctor, who like the one hundred-per-cent catholic population of the town, had little time for the SS, although he had twice voted

for Adolf Hitler in the thirties, listened to the Sergeant-Major's stumbling explanation, then snapped, "Trousers down, and hold on to that table – firmly."

"Why?" the Butcher asked a little fearfully, as he fumbled with his braces.

The bespectacled little doctor who, as a young military doctor in Stenay in the First World War had dealt with two or three hundred VD cases a day, mumbled, "You'll soon find out."

He pulled a rubber stool over his forefinger and stuck it up the Butcher's anus.

The Sergeant-Major yelped with pain. "What did you do that for?" he grumbled. "The trouble's at the other end, doctor. Not in my arse."

"Keep still," the doctor ordered and began to work his finger in more deeply.

Five minutes later, as the doctor leaned over the microscope in the corner, staring at the sample he had obtained, the Butcher hung numbly on the edge of the table, his head bent, as if in defeat. The doctor took off his gold-rimmed spectacles and looked grimly at the NCO, his faded eyes full of *schadenfreude*. "I am afraid, my dear Sergeant-Major, that you have caught gonorrhea, as far as I can ascertain from a quick examination."

"But that's impossible," the Butcher exclaimed. "I haven't been with a woman for months except my –" he broke off suddenly, overwhelmed by the tremendous magnitude of that abrupt realization. The doctor shrugged. "My dear man, I hope that, as a member of the Black Guards," he could not resist the sneer, "the representatives of a newer and better Germany, you do not believe that one can contact the disease without sexual intercourse!"

The Butcher did not reply. When he was cured, he promised himself, he'd punch the bastard in his sneering face. But that would have to come later; first he must be cured. "No, doctor," he answered hesitantly. "No, of course not."

"Good. Now get yourself onto the couch in the corner and stretch out on your back."

With his trousers around his ankles, he struggled over to the couch looking absurdly like a small child who had wet his pants. He stretched himself out on the cold leather of the couch. The little doctor bent over him and with his thumb and forefinger, he lifted up Butcher's penis as if it were exceedingly filthy and slipped a small dressing round it.

With difficulty the Butcher craned his head and said, "What are you going to do, doctor?"

The doctor turned to his tray of instruments. "In France, the soldiers used to call it the umbrella," he said with a faint smile at the memory. It was the first time he had used the soldiers' term in nearly a quarter of a century.

"The umbrella?" the Butcher asked, a horrid realisation beginning to dawn on him.

"Yes – a special catheter we use in this kind of business," he explained. He raised the instrument so that the Butcher could see it and pressed the little catch at its base. A series of small blades sprang out at the other end. The Butcher swallowed hard. In spite of the coldness of the leather, he felt the sweat start up all down his back.

"That," he gulped, "in there?"

"Yes, in there!"

As the doctor seized his penis firmly and inserted the catheter, a look of pleasure on his ancient wrinkled face, the Butcher screamed in agony.

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Sergeant-Major Metzger was limping badly when he emerged from the surgery. After the treatment, the doctor had told him he could go and urinate. But when he saw the blood shoot out of his maltreated organ, he stopped immediately. Now his bladder felt as if it were about to burst. But he bit his lip and resisted the urge. In fact, he was just swearing to himself that he would probably never urinate again, when he almost bumped into Private Schulze. "Schulze," he exclaimed in surprise, and regretted the next moment that he had raised his voice, "what the devil are you doing here, man?"

Schulze, standing rigidly to attention, said, "Going to see the doctor, Sergeant-Major."

"Why don't you go to the MO?" Metzger asked.

"Marital problem, sir," Schulze replied. "Didn't think the MO would be the right man for it."

"Oh," the Butcher said without much interest. "didn't even know you were married." Then, in a voice that was almost human, he added, "But I know what you mean. Wives are good for nothing but trouble!"

He acknowledged Schulze's salute carefully and left him.

"You're right there, mate," Schulze sighed and grinned in spite of the

pain. "Poor old Lore'll be in for the worst hiding of her life as soon as the Butcher gets home," he thought to himself. He opened the door and steeled himself to face the music.

***

Twelve hours later the Battalion was ready to move, the long column of heavily-laden half tracks parked around the barrack square under the trees, hidden from the curious gaze of British and French reconnaissance planes. On their wooden bunks the young men, exhausted yet too excited to sleep, waited for the call which must soon come.

CHAPTER 9

"Gentlemen," the Vulture said, hardly able to contain his own excitement, "we have our orders at last! And they are better than I could possibly have expected. There'll be a piece of tin in this for all of you, believe you me!"

The Vulture strode over to the big trestle table and pulled back the grey army blanket that covered the model. "Eben Emael," he announced triumphantly, "the most impregnable fortification in Europe, stronger than anything we have in our own West Wall and naturally better than the Maginot Line!"

The officers crowded closer to examine the detailed model of Belgium's key fortified area, which guarded the junction of the River Meuse and the Albert Canal and barred the way to the plain of Northern France.

"According to Admiral Canaris' men," Captain Geier lectured them as if they were back at Bad Toelz, "Fort Eben Emael is constructed in a series of concrete and steel underground galleries. How deep, the Abwehr agents do not know. However, we do know that the gun turrets are protected by the thickest armour that Liege can provide and are expected to be able to withstand the heaviest known bomb or artillery shell." He chuckled softly. "But the Belgians are not aware that we have a secret weapon to take care of that armour – our hollow charges. That, however, is the problem of the engineers."

"And our problem, sir?" von Dodenburg said softly, eyeing the model of the Belgian fortification, which he knew had been thoroughly modernized in 1935 and was expected to hold up any enemy for an indefinite period.

"General Student's 7th Airborne Division had been training a special force of parachute engineers for the last six months for the task of making the initial attack on Eben Emael," the Vulture explained. "Eighty men or so under the command of a certain Captain Witzig."

"Eighty men!" they said incredulously. "To take that place? The garrison alone must number several hundreds."

"One thousand, two hundred to be exact," the Vulture said calmly. "With elements of the Belgian 7th Infantry Division, the *Cyclistes Frontiere*, and perhaps the best troops the Belgians have at the frontier, the *Chasseurs*

Ardennais, in the immediate area of the fortifications." He glanced around their earnest young faces. "But, gentlemen, I am surprised at you that you should doubt German ingenuity for one single moment! Apart from our hollow charges, we have another surprise up our sleeves. Captain Witzig is going to land with his men by glider – *on top of Fort Eben Emael!*"

The Captain could not conceal his satisfaction at the look of surprise which sprang to their faces. "It will be their task to keep the garrison occupied, while we advance towards them, link up and reduce the fort." He said the words without any emphasis, as if he were talking about a normal route march, an everyday routine exercise; yet a quick glance at the model on the table sufficed to tell them that the link-up would be anything but a walkover. The River Meuse would have to be crossed and the Albert Canal, plus what looked like a medieval moat, even before they could come within striking distance of the great fort's bristling guns.

"Our line of march will take us from Maastricht," the Vulture went on, tapping the model with his cane to emphasize each point he made, "over the Meuse by one of the three bridges. The village of Canne – here – will be taken by Company One by storm. We will jump over them and cross the Albert Canal here. Thereafter the Third Company was scheduled to take over from us and attack the key gun emplacements – 17, 23, 36, 45 and 46. As you can see from the model, they cover the whole length of the river and the canal. As long as they are in Belgian hands, a mass crossing of our armies is impossible. In essence they are the key to the door of Belgium and Northern France."

He looked at them solemnly, without a trace of the usual cynicism in his face. "However, I asked the commander if this company could have the honour of taking those emplacements. I hope you will agree that I acted in your best interests."

The officers clicked to attention. Von Dodenburg spoke for the rest. "As the company officer, sir, we are indebted to you for your foresight. It will be a great honour for the company, which will be appreciated by the men, I am sure."

"Thank you, von Dodenburg. I am certain you are right. Undoubtedly the men will be duly appreciative when they learn the honour which has been granted them. The Battalon Commander thought it might be too much for the 2nd Company, but I assured him that we could do it. Now I must rely upon you and the men to ensure that I am not proved a liar." He grinned. "After all,

gentlemen, as I am sure you are all well aware, I want to come out of this campaign with my major's insignia."

There was no answering smile on their serious young faces. "Boors," Geier thought contemptuously, "ideological boors!" But he kept the thought to himself. He would need them in the days to come – and when they were dead, other eager young ideological fools, avid for a violent death in the cause of 'Folk, Fatherland and Führer' – if he were to realise his dream of becoming a general officer.

Stretching himself to his full height, he said, "Gentlemen, you realise the importance of our task. If we fail, we hold up the whole advance of the Wehrmacht. In essence, the success of the whole campaign lies in our hands. And we have exactly thirty-six hours to complete our assignment." His eyes flashed round their faces. "*Meine Herren, Heil Hitler!*"

They responded with all the fervour of their youthful hearts, typical products of the National Socialist dream, with its loud effrontery, brown-shirted vulgarity and jackbooted cruelty and which would soon demand its sacrifice in blood from them.

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Shortly before midnight on 9 May, 1940, the halftracks rattled through the gate of the Adolf Hitler Barracks for the last time. The blacked-out cobbled streets of the town were empty, and as the metallic noise of their vehicles reverberated between the houses, no one opened his shutters to stare. Instead the simple Catholic peasants hurried to kneel in front of the plain wooden crucifixes which were the sole decoration in most of the bedrooms.

The Black Guards – SS Assault Battalion Wotan – were going to war.

BOOK II – BAPTISM OF FIRE

"What terrible scruples you have for an SS officer! Don't you realise that a whole army is lining up behind us, and behind that a whole nation of eighty million souls? In the face of that, what is important or even significant about the lives of a few obscure civilians?"

Captain Geier to Kuno von Dodenburg. 11 May, 1940.

CHAPTER 10

Moonlight flooded the cobbled frontier road. Up ahead a faint pink glow tinged the clouds. On both sides the torn-up fields were filled with the long shadows of the waiting Mark IVs, and the halftracks carrying the men of Assault Battalion Wotan.

Somewhere a slow, old-fashioned Dutch machine gun was chattering like an angry woodpecker and white and red tracer zig-zagged through the night. But the enemy fire and the prospect of violent action soon to come did not worry the SS men any longer. They had been waiting outside the Dutch city of Maastricht for over two hours now and they were bored. It seemed an age since the great black shapes of the DFS 230 gliders, carrying the paras, had slid over their heads on their way to Fort Eben Emael, towed by the three-engined Junkers. "Hurry up and wait," they complained softly as they smoked, hands carefully cupped around the glowing ends of their cigarettes, "the same old Army game."

"Don't the Dutch know there's a war on?" Schulze snorted to von Dodenburg as they sat together in his Volkswagen jeep, waiting for the order to move. "If this is total war, give me –" He was interrupted by the noise of a motorbike roaring up the road towards them, weaving its way in and out of the traffic. Its rider recognised the halftracks and braked hard. The mud-splattered bike skidded sideways towards them for a good five yards. The rider sprang from the saddle and let the bike spin into a ditch.

It was the Vulture, his uniform covered in mud, a bloodstained bandage wrapped round his head, his monocle still clamped in his eye.

Von Dodenburg sprang out of the Volkswagen in alarm. "What happened, sir?"

"Nothing, nothing," he panted. "That damn-fool driver of mine went over one of our own mines. Now he's dead and I hit my head on a stanchion." He waved his hand irritably. "But that's of no matter! The paras have landed on the Eben Emael plateau, though not in the numbers expected. Witzig, their commander, is missing." He paused to catch his breath. "Heavy fighting!" From the south-west came the thump of a heavy gun, followed by a spurt of flame, as if to emphasize his words.

"All very confused at the moment, as usual. One thing is certain. The

paras haven't taken their objective at Canne."

"The bridge, sir?" von Dodenburg asked.

"No, the enemy blew it up before they could rush it." Geier shook his bandaged head. "A bad blow for us. It'll hold us up. But that's of no matter. The Battalion Commander has ordered me to push on immediately with the Second Company."

Von Dodenburg pointed to the blocked road ahead. "Impossible, sir," he said, raising his voice as the firing on the other side of the border began to increase in intensity. "We'll never be able to get through that mess with our halftracks."

"You think so? Tell your men to mount up and I'll show you how it's done!"

While the halftracks roared into life the Vulture doubled over to the nearest Mark IV. "You!" he barked to the black-uniformed tanker smoking on its turret, "What's your rank?"

"Sergeant, sir!"

"And your unit?"

"The Fourth Panzer."

"Good, well now you're attached to the SS."

"But sir," the sergeant protested.

"No buts!" Geier cried above the roar, clambering up on the turret, "head right into that column up there and clear a path for my men!"

The NCO hesitated, then he caught a glimpse of the SS officer's face and changed his mind. Hurriedly he clambered into his turret and began to rap out orders. The tank's diesels whined. A throaty cough, followed a second later by the ear-splitting roar of the 230-horsepower engine. The night air was heavy with the stink of diesel oil.

The Vulture waved his blue torch at the halftracks. Von Dodenburg jerked his elbow into Schulze's ribs. "All right," he yelled, "you saw the signal. Move after him!"

Schulze rammed home first gear. "This I've got to see," he cried, as the halftracks began to emerge onto the road.

The Mark IV moved forward with a rusty chattering of tracks. Hurriedly the waiting Wehrmacht infantry sprang out of the way. Angry cries went up on all sides. "What's going on?" an officer shouted. "What the devil do you think you're about?" Then he caught a momentary glimpse of the silver SS runes. "Ah, ah!" he shouted bitterly, "the gentlemen from the SS!

So that's it!"

Geier, towering up above him on the tank turret, waved his cane. "Yes, the gentlemen from the SS going to war!"

They rolled on. On both sides of the road the pitiful procession of the walking wounded began to make their appearance, toiling back to the regimental aid posts. Suddenly a train of horse-drawn artillery loomed up in front of the tank. The driver took his foot off the accelerator instinctively. The Vulture slashed at the tank sergeant with his cane. "Don't stop!" he cried in a frenzy of rage. "Tell him to keep on going!"

Holding his smarting face with his right hand, the sergeant kicked the driver's shoulder to indicate he should increase his speed again. The Mark IV smashed right into the unsuspecting column. Horses plunged and whinnied in panic. Drivers cursed as their carts swung precariously close to the ditches on both sides of the road. Angry shouts rose on all sides, as the halftracks rattled on behind the tank, with the SS men jeering, "Make way for the Wotan Battalion, you damned stubble-hoppers, you!"

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Just as the pre-dawn sky began to break up into the dirty white which heralded the morning, the Vulture directed the Mark IV off the cobbled road onto a rough track. Now they were getting very close to the scene of the fighting. Above the line of dark firs, which marched across the horizon like a column of spike-helmeted Prussian grenadiers, there were constant soft puffs of grey smoke. Both sides of the track were littered with abandoned equipment, German and Belgian. Next to a pillbox, which the shellfire of the initial barrage had pocked as if with the symptoms of some disease, a German tank was burning fiercely.

Schulze cursed as he manoeuvred the Volkswagen round a dead body sprawled in the middle of the road. "This is like a Strength through Joy tour," he said. "Germany, Holland, and now Belgium."

"Shut up, Schulzie!" von Dodenburg snapped, concentrating on the tank in front of them, "and watch you don't land us in the ditch!"

As Schulze changed up again and increased speed, he guessed that Geier had guided the company around Maastricht and its clogged-up narrow streets. Now they must be getting close to the Belgian frontier and the first water barrier, the River Meuse. The dead Belgian soldier and the abandoned

equipment proved that.

Warily he eyed the dark pine woods on both sides. Behind him the young troopers in the half tracks took up their positions, gripping their weapons tensely; this was an ideal place for ambush, as the burning tank indicated.

But nothing happened. The woods gave way to open fields, which still glistened with the early morning dew. In front of them a small hamlet loomed up. Nothing stirred. Not even a dog barked.

Geier thumped the sergeant on the shoulder. "Tell the driver to move round to the left of the houses," he ordered. "My men will cover you."

"But sir," the sergeant protested, his mind still full of the charred body of the dead tanker sprawled out in the road behind them, "that village is an obvious place for an ambush. I don't like it. I think –"

"You're not paid to think, sergeant," Geier interrupted him.

As the Mark IV stopped momentarily while the sergeant gave his driver the order, Geier dropped over the side and doubled back to von Dodenburg's Volkswagen. "Quick," he yelled, "get your vehicles off the track."

While the tank rumbled forward like an awkward metal duck waddling towards a pond, the halftracks clattered into the fields on both sides of the track. Schulze and von Dodenburg stood upright behind the windscreen to watch it as it got closer and closer to the silent village, its 75mm cannon swinging from side to side like the snout of some predatory monster seeking its prey.

Schulze thrust back his helmet and wiped the sweat off his face. "All this tension is no good for my nerves, sir. I think I'll apply for a posting back to Hamburg as soon as the company office comes –"

He stopped in mid-sentence, interrupted by a violent explosion from the direction of the village. The first shell shattered the stillness of the morning.

"Holy shit!" von Dodenburg cursed. "An anti-tank cannon!"

His words were drowned by the echoing boom of metal striking metal. The Mark IV lurched to a halt. For a moment nothing seemed to happen. Then a great orange-yellow flame leaped into the air. Schulze ducked hurriedly as huge metal splinters, glowing red-hot, hissed towards them. He caught a last glimpse of the tankers, screaming frantically as their black uniforms began to crackle with flames, clutching the turret with charred fingers in their attempt to escape; then his windscreen shattered and he could see no more.

"Just as I thought," Geier said as they crouched in the ditch, listening to the whine of the ricochets and the ragged chatter of the enemy machine guns.

Von Dodenburg looked at his CO incredulously. "You mean, you knew the village was held? You sacrificed the tank?"

Geier shrugged. "What's one tank? A couple of fools who joined the Tank Corps because they thought it was easier and safer than the infantry. Now they've learned their lesson." He grinned. "Unfortunately, a little too late." He changed the subject. "According to my map, the Meuse is on the other side of that village. Probably over the rise. If we can get through that rabble holding the village, we'll reach it hours ahead of the rest of the battalion."

Kuno did not think it opportune to point out that the 'rabble' in the buildings around the church were doing a damn good job of holding up a company of Black Guards. Instead he listened attentively while Geier explained his plan.

"A pincer-movement in other words. You take the left column of halftracks, I'll take the right. Smash right into them with all you've got. And remember – don't worry about casualties! We must get through to the river. Do you understand?"

In that instant Kuno realised that the Vulture would sacrifice the life of every man in the company to achieve his aim. The CO's dark eyes were empty of any emotion, completely empty. The next moment he was making a mad dash for the halftracks, hidden by the dead ground to the rear, enemy bullets stitching a vicious trail at his heels.

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The first halftrack was hit and came to an abrupt halt. Behind it the broken track lay flopped out like a severed limb. Another was hit in the gasoline tank. It went up in flames immediately, its exploding ammunition zig-zagging into the sky at crazy angles. The troopers bailed out frantically, leaving the dead and dying in their burning coffins.

A grenade sailed through the air and landed to the rear of von Dodenburg's crowded halftrack. "Duck, sir," Schulze yelled. It exploded with a sharp vicious crack and shrapnel hissed through the air. Next to von Dodenburg, the driver cursed and clapped a hand to his shoulder. Blood started to spurt through his tightly clutched-together fingers, his head dropped

to the wheel and before Schulze could grab it, the halftrack lurched into a ditch where its axle broke with a sudden crash.

"Bail out!" von Dodenburg yelled.

The survivors needed no urging. While von Dodenburg grabbed the heavy machine gun mounted on the cab and sprayed the houses to their front, they levered themselves over the metal sides, pressing their bodies close to the armour to present the smallest target possible.

"Don't leave me!" someone screamed from the bottom of the halftrack. A badly wounded man, his hands held close to his shattered stomach, staggered to his feet and tried to clamber over the side. As he did so, he moved his hands. His whole stomach was ripped open and he fell forward over the side of the half-track, dead.

Schulze suddenly felt all energy drain out of him. The dead man was the boy he had helped over the wall of the assault course. Now, within ten minutes of going into action, he was dead. It had all been for nothing.

"Schulze, for God's sake, get out of here – before the bastard goes up!" von Dodenburg yelled and pushed him out of the shattered cab. Thick white smoke, tinged with oil, was beginning to pour from the engine.

"Follow me!" von Dodenburg cried above the roar, placing his hand, fingers outspread, on the crown of his helmet – the infantry sign for 'rally on me'. Without waiting to check if they were doing so, he rushed forward, firing his machine pistol from the hip as he ran. In a ragged bunch, his men followed.

A soldier in a coal-scuttle helmet, his face contorted with fear, leaped up from behind a manure heap. In his hand he held a grenade.

Von Dodenburg pressed the trigger of his Schmeisser. The 9mm slugs ripped his chest open. He sprawled forward, his helmet tumbling over his face, the grenade rolling away harmlessly. Another enemy soldier popped up from a trench which had been dug behind the cover of the manure heap. He had a big pistol in his hand. Schulze kicked him in the face. He screamed and went reeling back, his face a bloody mess.

They rushed on. A smoking halftrack barred the way, dead SS men scattered on the ground all around it in the abandoned postures of the violently-done-to-death. Von Dodenburg sprang over the body of a soldier, whose legs had been ripped off by a burst of heavy machine gun fire at point blank range.

Two enemy soldiers were trying to mount an ancient Hotchkiss

machine gun behind the cover of the smoking halftrack. Their sweat-lathered faces were bent over the gun. Suddenly they saw the advancing SS men. For what seemed an age, their frightened eyes mirrored their indecision. "Fight or flight," was the question they posed.

Suddenly the bigger of the two dropped the Hotchkiss barrel and began to run. Too late! An SS trooper let him have a burst in the back. He threw up his hands, as if pleading with heaven to spare him, then dropped to the ground on his face without a sound.

The other raised his hands in surrender. But the SS men could not stop themselves now. The bow-legged Bavarian, who had filled his pants during the tank training exercise, fired and the soldier dropped slowly, a look of utter disbelief in his eyes.

Then they were in the burning village. On both sides of the cobbled street, the shattered windows were filled with shouting, firing men. They clattered up the narrow pavements, hugging the protection of the walls, firing upwards. Men dived heavily from the windows and lay sprawled out like broken dolls in the middle of the street.

As they ran on, a big brown Flemish plough horse broke out of a stable, foam bubbling along the line of its slack lips, as it squealed in terror at the flames. A great red ox lumbered after it, thrusting aside a heavy plough, as if it were made of wood.

"The, animals, sir," Schulze yelled above the noise, his hands cupped around his mouth. He had lost his machine pistol. All he had was a stick grenade thrust into his belt, "Follow the animals, sir!"

Von Dodenburg caught on at once. He ran after them as they blundered down the street, sending the defenders scattering to get out of their way. Before they could recover, the SS were among them, spraying the streets with lead. The surprised enemy fell back. Men dropped groaning everywhere. Suddenly they broke altogether.

Throwing away their weapons, they scrambled for safety. A wild lust overcame the SS men. They poured burst after burst into the retreating enemy. A group of them jammed a doorway in their frantic attempt to escape. Without mercy the troopers mowed them down. And for good measure, Schulze lobbed a potato masher grenade through the shattered window. It exploded with a muffled crump. From within came pitiful cries of agony, then silence. Slowly a head, with the helmet still attached, came rolling through the door, picking its way through the dead and dying, as if of its own

volition. Finally it came to rest at Schulze's feet. He gulped and looked away hurriedly. The crazy moment of murder and mayhem was over.

Slowly the crackle of small arms fire died away, and stopped altogether. Exhausted and drained of all energy they collapsed against the bullet-pocked walls, gasping for breath, as if they had run a great race, their eyes shining wildly, unable to control their shaking limbs. Automatically Kuno von Dodenburg changed the magazine on his Schmeisser and found he had to bite his lips hard and concentrate all his will-power to stop his hands shaking. It was the typical after-action reaction, he knew. Soon, some of the men would begin to cry, for no apparent reason, while others would shake all over, as if affected by a violent fever. Only Geier, appearing suddenly from nowhere, prodding a fat and very frightened Dutch customs sergeant in front of him with his cane, was as calm as ever.

"I found this prime specimen hiding in a barn," he explained, "with his fat Dutch arse sticking up from the hay so you could see it a kilometre away."

The Dutchman was a huge man with a fat pink, well-fed face and a stiff waxed blond moustache of the type favoured by NCOs in the First World War. But that was the only thing martial in his appearance; the tell-tale stain in his grey-green trousers revealed just how much of a coward he was.

"He's pissed himself!" Schulze said contemptuously. "Just another hero in uniform."

"Shut up!" the Vulture snarled. "Our friend here has got some useful information for us. Haven't you, *Mijnheer*?" He dug the fat official in the small of the back to emphasise his words.

"*Ja, ja, mijnheer,*" he gasped rapidly. "The tower – the church tower," he added in guttural German. "You'll see."

"Come on, von Dodenburg – and you too, Schwarz," the Vulture turned to the dark young lieutenant who had just come up, his face black with dirt and powder burns, a rip in his left trouser leg. Rapidly they strode towards the church, with Geier prodding the fat Dutchman in front of him, as if he were herding a pig. Everywhere the young men of the Assault Battalion were beginning to recover from their first taste of action and were rounding up the survivors and a handful of frightened civilians.

Sergeant-Major Metzger appeared, his uniform immaculate; the only sign that he had taken part in the action was the machine pistol clasped in his big fist. He clicked his heels together and reported, as if he were back in the Adolf Hitler Barracks, "Twenty casualties, sir. Eight dead and twelve

wounded, seven seriously, sir!"

Geier waved for him to lower his voice. "See what you can do to patch up the wounded. We'll need every man for the river crossing."

"Yes sir," the Butcher doubled away, his shoulders squared, his weapon carried at exactly a right angle to his big body, just like the soldiers did in the training films.

Geier shook his head. "No wonder the shitty civilians talk about wooden-headed soldiers." He prodded the fat Dutchman. "Come on, we've no time to waste. Every minute counts."

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Schwarz kicked open the door of the church. Cold air greeted them, heavy with the smell of stale incense and unwashed farmers' bodies. A dead soldier lay sprawled across the floor, a rifle still clutched in his hands, his wide-open eyes staring vacantly into nothing. The Dutchman stepped over him carefully. Schwarz, however, gave him a vicious kick in the ribs. "That bastard got one of my men," he snarled, "before we fetched him down from the steeple."

"Save your energy, my dear Schwarz," Geier said with a trace of his old cynicism. "for the living. It is wasted on the dead, believe you me!" He turned to the horrified Dutchman again, who was staring down at the dead soldier. "Well, *Mijnheer,* where is the best vantage point?"

The Dutchman poked a fat forefinger upwards. "The tower, sir," he quavered, "from there you can see best."

Von Dodenburg took a step forward, but the Vulture stuck his cane in front of the young officer's chest quickly. "No, my dear von Dodenburg, you are too good an officer to lose – just yet. In case there are any of our friends still up there, let them have the Mijnheer as their principal target. He's got enough blubber on him to cover the lot of us." But the platform on top of the tower was empty, save for a handful of white pigeons which flew away as they opened the trap and clambered through.

Cautiously, they crept through one by one, after the Vulture had heaved the fat Dutchman onto the platform with surprising strength for such a small man. The CO glanced around the skyline. The early morning sun was still behind them. He could use his binoculars without their reflection giving away their position. With Schwarz and von Dodenburg flanking him, he crawled to the edge of the platform and peered out. Some five hundred metres away lay

a silver snake of silent water stretched out against the background of the deep green fields. Geier looked at them triumphantly. "Gentlemen, the River Meuse. We have reached objective number one."

While the Dutchman cowered in the corner, they focused their binoculars carefully and surveyed the river line.

It was Schwarz who spotted the little group of ferry boats tied up to the near bank of the river, downstream of the village. "Look, sir," he said, "boats – six of them. Enough to get half the company across in one go."

But before Geier had time to express his approval, von Dodenburg cut in. "Yes, and the position is covered by enemy infantry. Can you see, sir? At ten o'clock – two groups of them, among those bushes. Looks as if they've got a machine gun too. It's obvious that it's a well-known crossing point and they're prepared for anyone who might make the attempt."

From below came the sound of Sergeant-Major Metzger's voice, as he lined up the villagers and the captured troops, giving them orders in pigeon German, which he presumably thought they would understand as long as it was shouted loud enough and supported by a few well-directed blows.

"Idiot!" the Vulture grunted. "Why doesn't he shut his stupid face? I can't think with that row going on."

Schwarz leaned over the parapet, as if he were about to transmit the CO's complaint to the Sergeant-Major but he stopped and turned back to them. "I have an idea, sir. Those men dug in over there are Belgians, but they have a common language with the villagers. They might even have girlfriends over here. You know what soldiers are like – and the border is only a stretch of water."

"What are you getting at?"

"Well, sir, would they fire on the villagers, that's the point?" Swiftly he explained his plan.

"Capital," Geier exclaimed, "a capital idea, Schwarz!" He slapped him on the back enthusiastically. "Of course, it'll work!"

"But sir," von Dodenburg protested, "they're civilians. You couldn't..." he broke off, at a loss to find the right words to express his outrage.

The Vulture looked at him coldly. "My dear von Dodenburg, what terrible scruples you have for an SS officer! Don't you realise that a whole army is lining up behind us, and behind that a whole nation of eighty million souls? In the face of that, what is important or even significant about the lives of a few obscure civilians?"

He did not allow time for any further protest. "Come on," he snapped, "let's go. Time is running out!" He rose to his feet and clattered over the platform to the stone steps. Behind them the sun was high on the horizon now, blood-red and ominous, a portent of the blood-letting to come.

CHAPTER 11

An ominous silence lay over the broad expanse of the river. Grimly, they herded the terrified group of Dutch civilians towards the boats. At first the fat Sergeant helped them. He had confided to them that "as a member of the Dutch Fascist Movement" he "sympathized with the German cause". But now that he realised he was to go with the rest, he fell on his knees in the mud of the river bank, and hands held up in supplication, tears pouring down his fat face, he pleaded with them to let him go.

A tall skinny boy, who did not look a day over sixteen, spat scornfully and said in fair German, "What a good friend you have found to help you!"

Schwarz hit the boy hard across the face. "Shut your dirty mouth," he cried.

The terrified civilians were soon pushed into the boats and made to pick up the oars. A couple of SS men got in behind them, where they knew they would be safe. Geier, who had posted half the company along the bank around the crossing point, looked at von Dodenburg. "All right?" he asked.

"Yes sir," von Dodenburg snapped. A little voice deep down within his brain was crying out in protest, but he did not listen to it and when, in years to come, he began to pay attention to it, it was too late.

"Good. Let's get on with it then."

Von Dodenburg barked out an order.

The first boat pushed off. Immediately, half a dozen SS men, their boots tied around their necks, their weapons held high in their right hands, slipped into the water after it and grasped its sides.

One by one the other boats followed until half the company was in the water, with von Dodenburg commanding the right wing and Schwarz, the originator of the plan, the left. There was no sound, save the rusty squeak of the oars wielded by the civilians and, in the distance, the low rumble of artillery, the ever-present background music of war.

Von Dodenburg, swimming easily, kept his eyes firmly fixed on the opposite bank. Nothing stirred. Perhaps Schwarz's plan might work without bloodshed after all. They were halfway across now and he could see every detail of the far bank quite clearly – the wet line of the mud, the rusty strands of barbed wire and the tense faces of the soldiers who had crawled close to

the bank to meet this strange invasion.

Suddenly a red flare soared into the sky and hung momentarily over the river. As it hissed into the water, a Belgian officer in gleaming riding boots rose from the grass and cupping his hands to his mouth, yelled, "*Terug!* Go back, please!" The civilians stopped rowing immediately.

"Major," the fat sergeant quavered, "they'll shoot. Turn back, please!"

"Carry on!" von Dodenburg bellowed. "See they keep moving, men!"

The men in the boats needed no urging. Every yard gained, they knew, was one further towards dry land and safety. They jabbed their weapons into the backs of the terrified men and women. The boats moved forward again.

Von Dodenburg could see the awful indecision mirrored in the Belgian officer's face. Should he order his men to fire and prevent the Germans crossing the vital waterway? Or should he attempt to save the civilians and sacrifice his position?

Desperately the fat sergeant cried, "Take me back, please!"

"Keep 'em going," von Dodenburg warned, knowing that he was signing the civilians' death warrant.

In the leading boat, the two SS men tensed for the landing. Von Dodenburg could see the bow-legged Bavarian who had slaughtered the surrendering Dutch soldier raise his machine pistol ready for action. They were only a matter of ten yards from the Belgian officer now. They had almost done it.

Suddenly the blond boy, whom Schwarz had struck, sprang to his feet. The boat shook, dangerously with the violence of his movement. "Shoot!" he yelled in Dutch, "Shoot the bastards!"

His cry seemed to break the spell. The Belgian officer ducked as a machine gun began to chatter. The first burst caught the boy in the chest and he fell to the bottom of the boat. Behind him the Bavarian raised his machine pistol. A burst struck him in the face. Screaming with pain, he fell over the side.

"Attack!" von Dodenburg yelled. "Attack!"

Grabbing Schulze, he pulled him away from the boat and struck out for the bank. Lead hissed over the water, but by now the SS men were already scrambling up the bank in safety, while the machine gun turned the boats into a bloody mess of dead and dying civilians.

Schulze ran forward towards the Belgian positions, his entrenching tool his only weapon. His mouth wide open, screaming terrible obscenities, he

flung himself on the Belgians. A big soldier who had the red, weathered face of a farmer tackled him. With all his strength Schulze brought his shovel down. Its sharp blade cleaved into the Belgian's face. He screamed like a stuck pig. A great slice of his face came away with the shovel. He dropped, drowning in his own blood.

The officer crashed into von Dodenburg. They grappled with each other. Then von Dodenburg jerked his knee into the man's groin and he screamed and staggered back, clasping his stomach. Von Dodenburg fired a full burst into him, the slugs at such short range throwing him off his feet and carrying him a good two yards.

A helmetless Belgian sprang on to Kuno's back. The bayonet which he held like a knife glanced off the leather strap over von Dodenburg's shoulder. He rolled over, dragging the man with him. In grim silence, they struggled together on the grass. With all his strength the Belgian stabbed downwards. Von Dodenburg swung his head to one side at the very last moment. The Belgian cursed hotly in Flemish and tried to draw out his bayonet. Schulze towered over him, his entrenching tool raised high above his head, its blade gleaming with blood. The next instant it bit deep into the back of the Belgian's skull, which split in two. The Belgian rolled on his back dead.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the hand-to-hand struggle was over, the Belgian survivors running wildly into the fields beyond, flinging their weapons away in their haste to escape, while a couple of SS troopers fired wild bursts after them.

The 2nd Company, SS Assault Battalion Wotan had crossed the River Meuse, the first of the great obstacles in their way, at the cost of exactly two dead and four slightly wounded. But behind them the water was heavy with the bodies of dead civilians.

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"Excellent, excellent," Geier chortled, as he stepped out of the boat. "A tremendous achievement. There'd be a piece of tin in this for you, von Dodenburg and you, too, Schwarz, but for that unfortunate business back there." He indicated the bodies in the water behind him. "I'm afraid that wouldn't look too pretty in the recommendation." He cast a quick look at the slaughtered soldiers, sprawled everywhere in the gory shambles of the riverside trenches. "Poor equipment," he commented. "Look, they've still got

the old 1916 model water-cooled Vickers! I thought that type was ripe for the museum." He stepped over the body of the dead officer, whose pockets stuck up stiffly, where someone had looted their contents. "They could have done a better job with their emplacement too, don't you think?"

Only Schwarz had the energy to reply. "Inferior types, sir," he breathed, as if he were still having trouble in obtaining enough air. "Racially, that is."

"Just so," the Vulture assented, and dismissed the dead and Schwarz's genetic theories. Glancing at his watch, he announced. "We have got exactly twenty-five hours left, gentlemen. So far we have done exceedingly well. I congratulate you all. But that is now history. Beyond that next rise you can see up there is the village of Canne. Possibly the paratroopers have made a crossing of the Albert Canal. My guess is that they will have failed to do so. I think you all know my opinion of the Luftwaffe."

"You mean we will have to cross the Canal by force, sir?" Fick asked. Blood was still seeping through the thick field dressing, bound round his wounded arm.

"Yes, I'm afraid that King Leopold won't send his royal yacht to ferry us across," the Vulture said cynically. "But we shall worry about that in due course. Our first problem is to get into Canne. Fick, you'll stay at the river and guard the crossing with Kaufmann." The latter was still on the far bank trying to raise Battalion on the radio to inform Major Hartmann of their tremendous coup.

Fick pulled a face, but his arm was hurting like hell and he did not protest.

"You, Schwarz," the Vulture continued, "will approach the village from the south. And you," he turned to von Dodenburg, "from the north. I'll follow up with half a platoon in reserve. Whoever makes the breakthrough sends a runner back to inform me at once. We'll throw in the bulk of the company then. After all, remember the old Prussian motto – *Klotzen nicht klecksen*? It's right: keep your forces concentrated." He caught the look on Schwarz's face, one of sudden dramatic animation. "And my dear Schwarz, let us have no theatre! Your throatache will be cured in due course. You've already earned the Iron Cross – first class. Be content and save your men. We need every one of them."

Schwarz's eyes lit up at the mention of the coveted award. "You mean that, sir?"

"Naturally, I always say what I mean. You shall have your piece of tin

in due course; if you survive," the Vulture added sotto voce.

If the Lieutenant heard, his face did not show it. All it betrayed was a fierce determination to carry out the Vulture's orders, spurred on by the promise of the decoration.

Stupid fool, the Vulture thought to himself. *For a piece of tin, he'd march to the moon and back!* But he didn't express his thoughts aloud. He contented himself with a brisk military, "Well, gentlemen, get to it and happy landings!"

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"Is there anything you can do for him?" von Dodenburg asked, as Schulze bent over the Dutch boy, whom he had fished out of the water.

Schulze did not answer at once. He was busy taking off the boy's blood-soaked shirt, without causing more pain than he had to. For such a big man, he had surprisingly gentle hands. All the same the boy groaned. His breath was coming in short, shallow gasps, his eyes flickered open, wet with pain. His chest, now free, was a gory mess. Through the holes made by the first burst of machine gun bullets, they could see something white against the gleaming red, which jerked back and forth tremulously.

"His lungs," Schulze said in a whisper.

The boy heard the word and understood. "The lungs," he said weakly. "So. The Belgians can shoot better than you German bastards at least." His head fell back, as if he accepted his fate, knowing that there was nothing more to be said or done.

Slowly Schulze got to his feet. He wiped his hands on the sides of his trousers. "He's a brave little bastard," he said, almost as if he were speaking to himself. Then his voice rose and he looked at von Dodenburg. "What are we going to do with him, Lieutenant?"

Von Dodenburg looked down at the dying boy. "Get yourself a weapon and join the rest." He indicated the waiting SS men, not taking his eyes-off the Dutch boy.

Reluctantly Schulze did as he was told, casting a curious look over his shoulder a couple of times. The Butcher snapped an order and they began to trudge up the slope in the direction of the village. Schulze breasted the height. Stretched in front of them were the gleaming green fields, shimmering now as the sun burnt away the dew. Beyond they could make out the flat dumpy

outline of the village of Canne.

A lone pistol shot rang out behind the column. He turned and saw von Dodenburg running to catch up with them, the flap of his holster springing up and down as he ran. He didn't look at Schulze as he joined the column. They plodded on.

CHAPTER 12

The village of Canne was fleeing. Like their fathers, twenty-six years before, the men of Canne and their families were running west. The Prussians were coming yet once again!

To the SS men crouched in the drainage ditch surveying the western exit to the little village, it seemed as if all the stables and barns in the place had opened their doors to spew forth their contents on to the road. Great, open-sided farm carts, drawn by huge red oxen or ancient nags; dog carts, made of wicker-work, with Alsatian dogs padding beneath them; bicycles; wheel-barrows; even an invalid chair, powered by a blue-smoking, two-stroke motor. Everything and anything that could move, all packed high with the villagers' pathetic bits and pieces, mixed with their animals. There was even a barefoot boy, his shoes tied round his neck to save the precious shoe leather, beating forward a flock of protesting geese.

"Christ on the cross!" Schulze breathed softly, "I bet they've got the kitchen sink with them too!"

"You could be –" Von Dodenburg broke off suddenly. A double file of cyclists was forcing its way through the panic-stricken refugees, trying desperately to keep up some kind of military formation. "The Frontier Cyclists!" he exclaimed in amazement.

"Oh, my aching arse!" Schulze said. "Would you believe it! Don't the poor arseholes know there's a war on?" Apparently they didn't.

Stolidly, the brown-clad cyclists, their rifles slung over their backs, rode up the centre of the road, scattering the civilians, as if they were on a routine patrol. One of them waved to a pretty girl herding a couple of goats.

Von Dodenburg tapped the butt of his magazine to check if it were correctly fitted and the Butcher, who was crouched at his right, looked at him nervously. "Are you going to attack them, sir?" he asked, his voice strangely distorted.

Von Dodenburg stared at him curiously. "Of course, Sergeant-Major, they're a sitting target."

"But what if they're a come-on, sir?" the Butcher protested. "It's too easy. I think we should let them go by and then move in on the village."

Von Dodenburg realised then just how much of a coward Sergeant-

Major Metzger was and made a mental note to talk to Captain Geier about it as soon as the action was over. "You might," he said icily, "but I don't."

"Of course, of course, sir," the Butcher agreed hastily. "It was just a suggestion."

Von Dodenburg ignored him. "Schulze, pass the word on. As soon as I fire, everyone is to join in. Not one of them is to escape."

"And the civvies?" Schulze asked softly.

Von Dodenburg did not answer.

The cyclists came closer. Von Dodenburg counted them. Nearly a hundred. They outnumbered his men by two to one. But that didn't matter; they had surprise on their side.

A farm dog began to bark at the legs of the leading soldier. Without changing his erect posture or taking his eyes off the road, he launched a kick at it. The dog ran off howling. They were only fifty yards away now.

Von Dodenburg raised his machine pistol and focused on the man who had kicked the dog. He had a pompous pale face; he looked more like some jumped-up clerk than a soldier. The pale face began to fill the centre of his foresight. He fired and a row of red holes appeared along the man's breast. For one moment he continued to peddle on. Then he flung up his arms.

The next instant the other soldiers joined in. At once all was panic-stricken confusion. Animals broke away and burst the fences on both sides of the road. Refugees screamed and fled after them. In vain the cyclists tried to unsling their weapons, but the concealed SS men gave them no chance. Mercilessly they mowed them down.

Von Dodenburg rose to his feet, shouting "Follow me!" Schulze was first to spring up after him. Together they ran forward, firing from the hip as they ran. The rest followed, pouring a hail of bullets into the confused, chaotic press of soldiers and civilians fighting to get away from the site of the massacre.

In a matter of seconds it was over. Dead and wounded lay everywhere. Ahead, from the village, came the sound of firing, the unmistakeable high-pitched burr of a German Spandau. It was obvious that Lieutenant Schwarz and his men had run into trouble.

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Schwarz, his head bleeding and a biting pain in his side, sat crouched in the

evil-smelling farm privy and cursed. It had all been too easy. He had doubled his men forward into the village. Nothing had stirred. Confidently, his mind full of Captain Geier's 'piece of tin', he had ordered them to advance without any preliminary reconnaissance. One of his NCOs, old 'Hole-in-the-arse', as the men called him, had protested. But he had over-riden his protests. "You can see they're running away, Sergeant," he had shouted triumphantly, pointing at the refugees streaming out of the village. "Those Belgies have creamed their pants for sure!" He had waved to the troopers crouching on both sides of the road, and like some hero in a UFA film, had shouted "Advance!"

A moment later the slow Belgian machine gun had opened up from the first of the abandoned cottages. 'Hole-in-the-arse' had gone down. This time the holes had been fatal. Schwarz watched horrified as half his force melted away under the withering enemy fire.

Now he was trapped in the privy, to which he had crawled while the survivors of his group had fled down the road, abandoning their dying comrades, concerned only in escaping from that terrible wall of lead. Every time he raised his head, a bullet whacked into the stones above.

Schwarz wiped away the blood which was dripping from his wounded forehead and took stock of his situation as rationally as he could. It seemed as if he were alone in the village, though somewhere in the distance he could make out the high-pitched rhythm of German automatic weapons. But that was far away and he could hear nothing from the direction of his original position. His men had either fled or were sprawled out dead along the road.

Desperately he racked his brains for some way out of the mess he had got himself into. He knew that the Vulture would never forgive him for losing so many men when their objective was still not taken. The Vulture's bourgeois mentality would ensure that he was posted to some rear echelon outfit, where he would remain a 'base stallion' for the rest of war, while others won the decorations. In a year's time when the war was over, there would be 20-year-old captains, even majors, flashing around their knight's crosses, and he would still be a lieutenant, long overdue for promotion, his only decoration the War Service Cross, the medal they gave to fat-arsed civilian war workers.

Schwarz squirmed round on his back and fumbled in his breast pocket for his metal shaving mirror, which he had put there to protect his heart. Taking care not to let it reflect the sun's rays, he raised it slowly above his

head. Half a dozen bodies in German uniform came into view, sprawled out on the paving like broken dolls. They were his own men. He bit his lip and levered the mirror up a little more.

From the broken window of the first little cottage opposite his hiding place, the barrel of a Belgian machine gun poked threateningly. He swung the mirror to the right and caught a glimpse of another gun muzzle and a white face behind it. And another. The Belgian bastards certainly had him by the short and curlies.

Suddenly in the sky away to the east he saw a black gull-like shape. It was a long way away, but Schwarz recognised it immediately. "A Junkers 87," he cried aloud. "And another!" There was no mistaking their strange angular shapes, as the Luftwaffe's most deadly weapon droned closer and closer to the village.

As the noise of the engines grew louder by the second, Schwarz fumbled feverishly for his signal pistol. Hastily he fitted the first cartridge into the pistol, hoping he could remember the right order of colours to summon the aircraft.

He took another hurried glance at them through the mirror. Now they were flying low, perhaps two hundred metres at the most, keeping perfect formation, completely ignoring the tracer zipping in their direction.

Schwarz raised his pistol and, without exposing his body, fired in the direction of the Belgians. A red flare hissed into the sky. From across the road there came angry shouts. Bullets whined through the air. Above his head the door splintered and showered him with chips of wood. He fired again. A white flare sailed out in a great curve and hung over the Belgian positions. Then it slowly began to fall.

Schwarz waited. Had they seen his signal? And if so, had they understood it? He felt the sweat trickle down the small of his back, and he realised that he might have signed his own death warrant.

Then it started. The leading plane, completely black save for its yellow spinner, seemed to stop in mid-air. Its pilot tilted it sharply to port. Schwarz caught a glimpse of the black-and-white cross on its port wing. Suddenly, without any warning whatsoever, it appeared to fall out of the sky –a black stone plummeting down against the blue background.

The pilot turned on his sirens, which Schwarz remembered so well from the newsreels of the Polish fighting. Their blood-curdling scream filled the air. He clapped his hands to his ears to cut out the tremendous noise.

One hundred and fifty, one hundred, seventy metres, then the pilot levelled out. Dozens of bombs shining in the sunlight, came falling from its belly, jostling each other as they wobbled down towards the Belgian positions.

The incendiaries ignited, throwing out tiny pellets of magnesium everywhere. Within a matter of seconds thick, stinking clouds of white smoke had enveloped the houses. Someone screamed and a Belgian soldier burst through the smoke, his uniform already alight. He zig-zagged up the littered street, the flames licking higher and higher up his body. Schwarz waited no longer. Tossing aside the flare pistol, he flung open the door of the privy. A bullet smacked into the wall a foot away. Brick splinters splattered his face. Already the first of the houses opposite was beginning to burn fiercely. The Belgies would have no time for him now. The super-heated air seared at his lungs. Frantically he glanced up and down the street, looking for a way out.

Above him, beyond the thick pall of white smoke, a second Stuka was beginning its dive, its sirens going full out. Schwarz spotted the village's church. He knew that the Luftwaffe, like the artillery, had orders to avoid damaging enemy churches – 'cultural wealth' – as they were called in standing orders.

Gasping for air, he started to run for it. The screaming roar of the Stuka grew louder and louder. Suddenly the roar stopped and was replaced by a sinister, high-pitched whistle. High explosive!

Desperately Schwarz flung himself at the great wooden door of the church, clutching for the iron handle. As the first bomb exploded, the door sagged open and he fell inside to confront a little man who crouched there in the incense-heavy darkness.

***

The helmetless SS man came running down the grassy slope, arms flailing, eyes wild with fear, meaningless sounds coming from his mouth. An NCO struck at him with his fist. He side-stepped and kept on running. The Butcher cursed angrily and as the panic-stricken soldier came level with him, he jammed the butt of his machine-pistol into his face. The SS man dropped to the ground, shivering like a young puppy.

He was the first of a dozen or so survivors of Lieutenant Schwarz's group whom the Butcher lined up in front of von Dodenburg with the aid of

his levelled machine pistol. With a nod of his head, von Dodenburg indicated that he should lower the weapon. For a moment he said nothing; just looked at their white faces, their eyes staring and blank.

"What happened?" he asked the first man.

The soldier opened his mouth, but no sound came.

He asked the next man who began to babble a confused explanation. He slapped him hard across the face. The man staggered back, then shook his head a couple of times like someone waking up from a deep sleep. Von Dodenburg lowered his hand to his pistol. "I'll give you three," he said, "and if you haven't started giving me a rational answer by then, I'll kill you."

Von Dodenburg's men gasped with shock. Of all the officers in Battalion, he was the only one who never used his hands on the enlisted men. This sudden display of brutality was completely unexpected. But, as von Dodenburg had expected, the soldier began to talk, his description of what had happened in Canne coming in short hurried gasps. As he listened, the young officer felt his anger at Schwarz's foolishness begin to burn within him. It was typical of the spirit that the Vulture had engendered within the 2nd Company. 'Forward over the bodies' was his motto – one that had been swallowed hook, line and sinker by ambitious young fools like Schwarz. And what a mess he had landed himself in with it!

But there was no time now to dwell on Geier's theories. He would have to try to take the village without Schwarz's aid. Just as the Stukas came howling in over the little cluster of houses around the church, he began to give his orders.

***

"My name is Weissfisch," the little man said with surprising formality, as the Stukas flew away, "Moishe Weissfisch."

Schwarz, his left hand clutching his right arm in an attempt to stem the flow of blood from his wound, stared at the civilian in horror. With a name like that, he had to be a Jew. He was alone in a dark little Belgian church with a Yid!

The man seemed to read his thoughts. "Yes, Lieutenant,' he said in excellent German, "I am a Jew."

"But you speak German – and how did you know I am a lieutenant?"

The civilian smiled sadly. "Because I am as much a German as you," he

answered.

"You're not a German!" he cried. "You are a Jew!"

Weissfisch nodded. "Of course, but for fifty odd years of my life I paid my taxes, did my job, honoured my nation in the belief that I was part of it." He held up his right hand. It was encased in a dark-brown leather glove. "Verdun 1916," he said in explanation.

"And what are you doing now here, Jew?" Schwarz snapped.

Weissfisch shrugged. "Like the fool I've been all my life, Lieutenant, I stayed on. I believed that things might change, that all the hate against the Jews would cease when Germany had regained what she lost at Versailles. A week ago after they came to take away my wife – according to your strange classification of humanity, she was something called 'full-Jew' – I decided to cross the Belgian border." He smiled, the look on his face a mixture of sadness and self-contempt. "As you can see, it seems I am too late." He broke off suddenly and looked at Schwarz curiously. "But haven't I seen you somewhere before?" he asked.

"Me? How the hell would a Jew like you know me?" Schwarz cried. "You must be crazy!" A horrible realisation started to grow within him, as the little Jew stared at him with no apparent fear. "Can't you see the runes on my collar? What would I be doing with racial dirt like you?"

"Forgive me, Lieutenant," the Jew persisted. "But your face. Those eyes..."

"Shut up!" Schwarz shouted at him.

But the little Jew wouldn't stop talking. With almost masochistic relish, he warmed to his subject. "In these last seven years, Lieutenant, I've had ample opportunity to study your National Socialist racial theories, and you know, I think there is something in them. In the Great War we always used to laugh at the 'Polack noses' of the recruits from West Prussia, and in the Rhineland you can always tell a 'Frankish face'. A fat pudding with a carrot of a nose stuck in the middle of it. Now your face, Lieutenant, exhibits the typical characteristics of the Central European Jew..." The little man's words stopped suddenly, as Schwarz grabbed him by the throat, his face masked in hate, his lips drawn back in an inhuman snarl like a trapped animal. "How dare you, a Jew, a Jew," he breathed hoarsely, too shocked to be able to formulate the sentence necessary to ward off the monstrous accusation. Instead he pushed him hard against the bare white-washed wall.

The little man stared up at him. There was no fear in his eyes only

sadness and compassion, as he prepared to meet the inevitable.

Schwarz's rage at the trick fate had played on him exploded within him. With all his strength he squeezed the Jew's skinny neck. Weissfisch's eyes bulged and his tongue shot out of his mouth. But he made no attempt to protect himself.

Deaf to the renewed rattle of gunfire, blind to everything but the Jew's face, he crushed the life out of his body until it gave one final violent contortion and was still for good.

Together they fell to the floor of the church, Schwarz's shoulders heaving as if he were sobbing, his head bent on the dead Jew's breast like a son asking his father's forgiveness for some unforgivable crime.

***

The men of von Dodenburg's group found him barricaded in the door of the church, a couple of ancient Lebel rifles on the pews he had used as cover, his machine pistol clasped in his hands, peering at the Belgians he had shot, sprawled out dead in the churchyard.

"Good for you, sir!" they cried enthusiastically, raising their helmets and wiping the sweat from their brows. "You really showed the bastards!"

One of the men who had run away came over and apologised to him. "Sorry, sir. But it was the first time in action and –"

Schwarz waved aside his protestations. "It's all right, man."

Kuno von Dodenburg pushed the man aside and leaned wearily at the door, breathed out hard and said, "What happened to him?" He indicated the little civilian slumped in the corner, his head bent at an impossible angle, bloody scratches down both sides of his sallow face, as if a wild animal had worked on him.

Schwarz did not even bother to look at the dead Jew. "Don't know," he said tonelessly. "Some civvie, I suppose." He shrugged carelessly. "Killed in the initial assault. Who knows?"

Von Dodenburg looked at Schwarz curiously. There was something strange about him. He had lost half his force, had been cut off for over two hours and had fought off the best part of a Belgian platoon single-handed. Yet he was utterly calm. And there was something far-away, vague, almost crazy about his eyes. There was not even the suspicion of a tremor in the hand that lit the cigarette which Sergeant-Major Metzger offered him so

respectfully. He looked from Schwarz back to the little civilian slumped in the corner. No sign of a bullet wound. And where had those strange scratches come from?

But von Dodenburg had no time to investigate the matter further. From outside came the chug-chug of an ancient engine, followed by the hoarse cheers of the tired young men lolling around in the square outside. He swung round and, followed by the officious Butcher, went hurriedly outside.

It was Geier and his reserve, crowded into an old Ford truck, piled high with equipment. Even before it stopped, Geier sprang out of the cab and came hurrying over to them, his face beaming. "Gentlemen, Major Hartmann has been seriously wounded and the rest of the Battalion has suffered serious losses on the Meuse. I am to take over the Battalion for the time being." He slapped his cane against the side of his boot. Von Dodenburg looked at Schwarz. But the latter's face was still numb and expressionless.

"I see, sir," was all that von Dodenburg could say, in the face of such naked pleasure at the realization of his ambition.

"Break out the cognac and cigars," the Vulture shouted at the men on the truck. "For everybody!"

There was a whoop of joy from von Dodenburg's weary men. They hurried forward, while the soldiers on the truck handed down their equipment, followed by boxes of looted Dutch cigars.

"Kaufmann found them," the Vulture said, beaming. "He ferried them across with the equipment. They came at a very opportune time to celebrate my promotion, eh?" He looked at von Dodenburg, as if it were only natural that he should share his joy, although it had been gained at the cost of so much human suffering. "Of. course it's only temporary, but who knows what the next few hours may bring, eh?" Then his face was serious again. "All right, you and you, Schwarz, let's get up to the water and have a look at Fort Eben Emael."

While the men of SS Assault Battalion Wotan celebrated with the looted cognac, the three officers set off across the fields towards the last barrier between them and Europe's greatest fortress.

CHAPTER 13

A paratroop helmet with a jagged hole in it lay in the grass just in front of von Dodenburg's nose. Inside the sweat band he could make out its owner's name quite clearly. 'Para-Corporal Horst Küfer'. Soon, he thought, a telegram would be hurrying to his next-of-kin to inform them that he had "died for Folk and Führer". Behind them, as they lay surveying the canal, one of the great DFS gliders which had brought the paras was sprawled out in a copse of snapped-off firs like a broken butterfly; there was no sign of its occupants, only the sound of German automatic weapons corning from somewhere in the cloud of smoke which enveloped Fort Eben Emael.

"They're still up there somewhere," Geier said, staring at the stretch of the Albert Canal, with the almost sheer concrete wall rising beyond. "That's something." His initial elation at his temporary promotion had vanished as soon as he had seen the Canal and the wall beyond and had realized the magnitude of the task facing them.

Von Dodenburg focused his binoculars on the smashed bridge downstream. The shattered girders which hung drunkenly into the water were littered with the grey-smocked bodies of the paras who had failed to capture it before the Belgians had blown it up. "They've got two MG positions covering it, as far as I can make out, sir. And there's a twin Oerlikon in that little copse beyond it at two o'clock."

The Vulture nodded his understanding. "Yes, I can see it. At least this spot appears not to be –"

One of the hidden fort's great cannon spoke. The fog of war was parted by a stab of red flame. A moment later it was followed by a sound like canvas being torn apart. A monstrous shell, so big that at first they could actually see it, hurtled through the air, bound for the German troops massed far to the rear.

"Thank God for that," Geier continued. "The paras haven't succeeded in knocking out the gun emplacements yet. I was worried that they might have been able to do so with their damned hollow charges."

Von Dodenburg looked at him, open-mouthed. The Vulture had made the statement as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. He shook his head in amazement and then dismissed his CO's overweening ambition; there

was nothing he could do about it. "What are your orders, sir?" he asked dutifully.

The Vulture put down his glasses and looked at his wristwatch. "God in heaven!" he cursed. "It's already fifteen hundred hours. We've only got eighteen left for the link-up."

"The men are beat," von Dodenburg said. "They must have a rest."

"I know, I know," Geier snapped. "I know how much the men can stand."

"Sorry, sir."

Geier waved his hand hastily, as if the matter were not worth any further discussion. "This spot is as good as any. We cross as soon as the sun goes down. Seventeen hundred at the latest. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"The men can rest till then. In the meantime I shall go back to Battalion and get it moving again. If you can get across I'll back you up with every man I can find."

"Sir," Schwarz broke in hoarsely, speaking for the first time. "Look?"

He pointed across the canal, beyond the steep glacis wall to the great grey-black mass of the fort which had suddenly appeared in the midst of the smoke, drifting into view like some huge ship emerging from a fog-bank. It rose like a massive concrete cliff, some two hundred and fifty feet above the water of the canal, its sides covered with ports as in an old man-of-war, but the guns they contained were no puny eight pounders; they were mighty 75mm cannon, mounted in pairs, and covered by supporting machine guns. For one long moment Fort Eben-Emael stood there, sinister and silent; then it slid slowly out of view again, disappearing into the grey fog of war.

***

While the men slept in the wrecked village, the Butcher prowled, sleepless and miserable, through the deserted streets. Although he was as tired as the rest of the men of the 2nd Company, worry drove him out to wander aimlessly through the wreckage, his mind full of the threat posed by von Dodenburg and the crossing of the Albert Canal, due in a couple of hours.

Idly he kicked a Belgian helmet in front of him in a highly un-military manner, taking a sip at his bottle of cognac after every five kicks. He had never imagined that war would be like this, in spite of the fact that he had

spent the last ten years of his life preparing for combat. The day did not end at seventeen hundred hours, as in the barracks, and the men were not alert and clean, but dirty, disgruntled and disrespectful. It was the attitude of the officers that displeased him most, especially that of von Dodenburg. Back in the Adolf Hitler Barracks, he had always known that without him nothing functioned; that the officers had relied upon him implicitly to ensure that the men, lazy, dirty bastards that they were, did as they were told – got up on time, washed, entered their names in the bath-book, cleaned their rifles and their foreskins at the prescribed intervals, in short, tried to be soldiers and not dirty-arsed, fornicating civilians. But here at the front everything was different.

Suddenly not only was he superfluous, he was also suspected of being a coward: he, a man, who had been known to 'make a sow' of a whole company in his heyday, who had once spotted that a recruit had not polished his belt buckle at a distance of fifty yards, and who in 1936 had been complimented on his ability to do the parade march by no less a person than Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler himself! Suddenly green-beaks like Mr Senior Lieutenant Shit von Dodenburg could accuse him of cowardice!

As if he hadn't enough trouble as it was! Tears of self-pity sprang to his eyes as he thought of what Lore had said to him, just after he had blacked her eye and knocked out several teeth on the night of his visit to the shitty-arsed rural quack. *He had never been able to satisfy her in all the ten years of their married life!* He took another sip of cognac.

Any woman who thought like that must be a whore of the lowest class. What decent woman concerned herself with such things? Orgasm, she called it, whatever that might be. In his hey-day, before he had married Lore and taken her out of the cafe to bring her up to his own status, he had been keeping four women happy, including one who was 'in hope' and wanted to do it all the time, as well as a doctor's wife – and everybody knows what they are like in bed, thanks to the perverted training they get from their husbands!

Sergeant-Major Metzger kicked the helmet and missed, staggering drunkenly and almost falling over. So now he had a terrible disease and no one cared. How would Mr Senior Lieutenant Shit von Dodenburg like to have his cock wrapped up in a little calico bag and hurting like hell every time he pissed and still be expected to go into action? He wouldn't like it one little bit! Drunkenly the Sergeant-Major grinned at himself in the glass of a shop window and mimed the word *No*. Then he frowned at himself, martially.

Captain Geier was different. He was not one of these wartime shits. He was an old pre-war soldier, who knew what the old days had been like – hard and unyielding. If you told a recruit to go and shit in his helmet; he would go and shit in it, even if he had to take senna pods to do so. His little red eyes filled with tears again at the memory of the old days.

"Those were good days, believe you me," he said severely to his image in the window, swaying wildly. "Soldiers were soldiers then, not shitty green beaks –"

He broke off suddenly. Another figure was standing beside him, staring at the glass, a crazy smile on her broad face. He turned, his hand on the trigger of his pistol. A girl was standing there, her bare legs stuck in huge manure-stained wooden clogs, her body covered in a dirty flowered peasant overall, with her mousy-blonde hair tied up in two absurd plaits that stuck out on both sides of her gaping face like wings. But the Butcher's drunken eyes were focused on her huge breasts which threatened to burst out of the skimpy overall every time she breathed, "Oh my aching back," he breathed in respectful awe, "haven't you got a lot of wood in front of the door!" The idiot girl grinned stupidly, revealing that both her front upper teeth were missing. She opened her thick legs and thrust out her plump stomach in unmistakable invitation, her mouth open and slack with desire.

The drunken Sergeant-Major felt an immediate stirring of lust at the idiot girl's directness, her blatant wantonness.

The girl recognised the look in his blurred red eyes immediately. "*Ik heet Anna. Ik ben niet getrouwd,*" she said slowly, her lips having difficulty in forming the simple words. The Butcher did not understand a word, but he did understand the unmistakable gesture she made with her thumb and two fingers.

"Where?"

She curled a dirty finger at him. "*Komm.*"

He staggered after her through the rubble. They turned off into a little cobbled lane. She opened the door of a dirty white cottage. It was dark and smelled of animals and sour milk. An ancient sagging brass bed stood in one corner, with a white chamber pot underneath it. It was full. The Butcher looked away hastily.

With a little scream of delight the idiot girl flung herself on the bed. It squeaked in protest. She grinned stupidly and her crazy eyes gleamed with lust. "*Nix vader, nix moeder,*" she said and indicated with a wave of her hand

that they had fled with the rest of the village. "*Heel goed!*"

The Butcher waited no longer. With the back of his boot he kicked the door closed. On the bed, the mad girl opened her legs. He saw she was naked. She threw her legs up in an importuning arch. The Butcher sensed his breath coming in rapid gasps. He hesitated. If he did it, the girl would get the disease. She moaned, put her hand between her legs and moved her powerful thighs in an unmistakable gesture.

The Butcher hesitated no longer. What did it matter with an idiot? Besides the whole world was against him. What did he care? With fumbling fingers, he tore at his flies. On the bed the girl squealed in anticipation. Drunkenly he fell on top of her. Her tongue penetrated his open mouth. For a moment her stale, unwashed smell repelled him. But then she pressed her tongue deep into his mouth and sucked at his saliva greedily, and he soon forgot the war, his problems, everything. Like a blind man, his big hands sought and found her great puddings of breasts.

***

Solemnly and in utter silence Lieutenant von Dodenburg moved from body to body removing the identity discs and fumbling in pockets for the dead men's few personal possessions: a photograph of a girlfriend or mother; the patiently written letter from a father urging caution and duty; that of a mother full of love and concern; one or two grubby low denomination mark notes. Behind him Schulze wrote down the names on a piece of paper with a stub of pencil, squinting in the rapidly failing light.

Von Dodenburg sighed and straightened up above the dead body of a young corporal who looked as if he had simply settled down on the cobbles and gone to sleep, his young face was so peaceful.

"How many, Schulze?" he asked softly.

"Twenty so far, sir. Their poor mothers!"

"They died for their country."

"Country!" Schulze echoed mockingly.

Von Dodenburg looked up. "What do..."

From somewhere there came a soft scream, a scream of pleasure.

"What was that?" he whispered, his body crouched, his machine pistol at the ready.

"It came from over there, sir," Schulze answered.

"Cover me. I'm going to have a look."

"Be careful, sir, it might be a sniper," Schulze urged.

Cautiously, hugging the shadows that had begun to lengthen at the side of the little street, the two men advanced towards the sounds coming from a little white cottage. They were rhythmic and persistent – almost like somebody getting a bit of the other, Schulze couldn't help thinking.

Von Dodenburg came level with the door of the cottage. With the forefinger of his free hand, he indicated in eloquent mime show that Schulze should go to the other side of the street until he was directly opposite the door. Noiselessly Schulze did as he was ordered. Von Dodenburg waited until he was in position, his machine pistol held firmly at his hip. Then he drew a deep breath and with all his strength crashed his booted foot against the wooden door. It gave immediately and he sprang back as Schulze fired a quick burst.

"Heaven, arse and twine? the unmistakable voice of Sergeant-Major Metzger cried in alarm.

"Good night, Marie," Schulze breathed incredulously, "the Butcher!"

Von Dodenburg, followed by the Hamburger, pushed through the door into the dark, evil-smelling room.

Sergeant-Major Metzger lay face downwards on the floor, trying frantically to pull up his trousers.

"Oh, my holy Godfather!" Schulze roared at the sight of the struggling, panic-stricken NCO. "The Butcher with his pants down!" Then the laughter froze on his face, as he realised what the Sergeant-Major must have done. "But you're not cured," he yelled accusingly, "You've given her..." He broke off suddenly. On the bed, the girl, recovering from her fright quicker than the NCO, grinned at them idiotically, her legs still wide apart just as the Butcher had left her when he had jumped from the bed in his fright.

Von Dodenburg assessed the situation at once. "Cover yourself," he snapped and when the girl only reacted with a cretinous smile, he pulled down her skirt. Her smile vanished, to be replaced by a thick-lipped infantile sulk. "Get out! Schulze, get her outside!"

Schulze grabbed hold of her and pulled her from the bed. "Come on, Greta Garbo," he said, "let's go." But, in spite of his rough manner, his voice was full of pity. "You've given your only performance of the day."

Outside he groped in his pocket and pulled out a squashed bar of ration chocolate, which was heavily spiked with stimulants. "Here you are, you poor

bitch. Take it and be off with you."

The idiot girl tried to curtsey her thanks in the country manner, but failed lamentably. Munching happily on the chocolate, her mind already empty of what has just happened to her, she wandered aimlessly into the darkness.

Schulze turned back into the cottage.

The Sergeant-Major, his trousers back around his waist again, but with his flies still undone, was standing rigidly to attention in front of the enraged von Dodenburg.

"Do you realise that we have a mission here?" he thundered. "Not only military, but also political! We are the bringers of the New Order! Fools like you destroy the faith of the local people in us Germans. My God, man, can't you understand that?"

"But she's only an idiot," Metzger said weakly.

"An idiot!" von Dodenburg roared. "Why that's even worse! What do you think the locals will make of that? The Germans enter a village, bringing with them a whole new philosophy of life, the regeneration of Europe. And what is the first thing one of their senior NCOs does – he screws one of their idiots!" Beside himself with rage, he swung back his hand and crashed it into the Butcher's unhappy face. The NCO staggered back against the wall, a thin trickle of blood beginning to run down his face, a look of utter disbelief in his red eyes. No one had struck him like that since he was ten years old. Sergeant-Major Metzger's whole world fell apart in that instant. He, a long-time regular soldier and the company's senior NCO, had been struck across the face like a common, shitty-arsed recruit on his first day in the Army! It just wasn't possible. But it had happened, and there was worse to come for Sergeant-Major Metzger.

His eyes blazing with anger, von Dodenburg swung round to Schulze. "Escort Metzger back to my command post. Keep an eye on him and do not hesitate to shoot if he tries to escape."

"Yes sir," Schulze said with relish. "You can rely on me."

"As for you Metzger. You are under close arrest until we start our attack in thirty minutes. Thereafter I shall release you to open arrest."

The Butcher attempted to stutter his thanks, but von Dodenburg cut him short. You will stay at my side throughout the action, do you understand?"

"Yes sir – of course, sir!"

"And one other thing."

"Yes sir!"

"You will be carrying the flame thrower that Captain Geier brought up in the Ford. From now onwards you are my group's flame thrower operator, Trooper Metzger."

Ex-Sergeant-Major Metzger stifled his groan just in time. Not only had he lost the coveted rank which had taken him ten years to reach, he had also been given what was virtually a sentence of death.

CHAPTER 14

The group of SS men, crouched in the mud at the canal's edge, fell flat on their faces as the searchlight swept over the still surface of the water. Like an icy white finger it traced its way across the canal, hesitated here and there, swept over their tense bodies and carried on. A moment later it went out and they were alone in the darkness.

"All right," von Dodenburg hissed, as if the enemy were only a matter of yards away, "get in the boat!" Awkwardly the Butcher, laden down with his flame thrower, stepped in, followed by Schulze. All along the water's edge, the others did the same. "Move off," von Dodenburg ordered.

Almost noiselessly they began to pull away. "The best of luck," the Vulture called from the bank, disappearing from sight a moment later.

Von Dodenburg shivered, he did not know whether it was fear or the sudden cold of the water. But it didn't matter. No one could see him in the darkness. Now they were exactly half way across. Up ahead he could see the dim outline of the concrete wall which disappeared into the night sky. If they were caught now, it would be a massacre, pure and simple, he thought to himself. They wouldn't have a chance.

Suddenly a green flare rushed into the night sky and hung there, apparently without motion. "Down," he yelled.

They stopped paddling at once. Crouched at the bottom of the boat, von Dodenburg could see Metzger's sickly-green face, his eyes wild with fear. He felt his own heart pounding wildly. Slowly the flare began to come down until, with a soft hiss, it extinguished itself in the water. Hardly able to control his voice, he said, "All right, pull away."

A few moments later a machine gun opened up near the wrecked bridge. They could see its white and red tracer bullets zig-zagging through the darkness and hear the ricochets whining off the concrete. But whatever the enemy gun's target was, it wasn't them.

Their boat hit the concrete wall with a sudden bump. Von Dodenburg did not waste any time thanking God for their arrival. "Get yourself into files," he ordered softly. "NCOs will lead. And I'll have the balls off any man who makes a noise. Get that!"

No one answered, but von Dodenburg knew that they were as well

aware of the danger of their position as he was. As soon as they began to scale the concrete they would be sitting ducks once more.

Slinging his machine pistol over his shoulder and carefully adjusting the strap of his helmet, Kuno ran his hand over his equipment to check that there was nothing loose which might bang against the concrete.

They reached the opposite bank. He took a deep breath and, reaching up into the darkness, sought and found his first handhold. The men followed.

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They lay on the top of the concrete bank wheezing like old men. At the expense of torn hands and bursting lungs, they had done it. The climb had been a nightmare, a brutal nightmare of fear and strain in the darkness but, in spite of the pain from his aching muscles and bleeding fingernails, von Dodenburg smiled weakly to himself in the darkness. They had done it without discovery. He wiped the sweat off his brow and keeping low, so as not to present too great a silhouette at the edge of the bank, he scurried over to Schwarz.

"Listen," he whispered, cupping his hands over the other officer's ear and wrinkling his nose at Schwarz's smell. He then remembered that none of them had washed for well over twenty-four hours. "We'll split up into two groups. The paras can't be far off, now. Watch that your men don't fire at them by mistake in the darkness."

Schwarz nodded and von Dodenburg crawled back hurriedly to his own men, going from man to man, telling each one the same, he hoped, encouraging information. "We're almost there. We should be linking up with the paras in a few minutes."

The SS men got wearily to their feet. In extended order, directed by the surviving NCOs' thumps and punches, for von Dodenburg had commanded that there should be no noise whatsoever, they began to plod across the wet field towards the sinister outline of Fort Eben Emael.

Then, suddenly, their luck ran out. With a blinding roar, the field exploded to von Dodenburg's right. In the sudden blast of orange flame, he saw a figure blown into the air. A moment later everything was pitch-black again and a terrified voice was screaming, "Mines, mines everywhere!"

"Stop, stop everywhere!" von Dodenburg yelled at the top of his voice, but he was too late. Another mine exploded only ten yards away. He ducked

automatically and a second later dirt and pebbles pattered down on his helmet like heavy summer rain. In the dying flame of the explosion he caught a fleeting glimpse of one of his corporals sitting on the ground, nursing the shattered stump of his right leg. Instinctively he moved to go to his aid but the corporal shouted, "Don't come near me, sir. The things are everywhere!"

Von Dodenburg stood rooted to the spot. What should he do? From the dark outline of the first gun emplacement red flares were beginning to climb into the air. He caught the sound of an order in a language he couldn't understand. A machine gun began to chatter. It was followed by a ragged crackle of rifle fire. "My God," someone screamed behind him and fell to the ground. Still von Dodenburg did not move.

In the next instant Schulze had made up his mind for him. "For Christ sake, let's get out of here, sir!" he yelled above the mounting volume of small arms fire.

"Where the hell to?"

"On top of that turret! It's the only way. We'll be in dead ground then."

"But the mines?"

"Screw the mines!" Schulze grabbed von Dodenburg's arm. "Come on!" The Butcher stood petrified, weighed down by the round cannister of the flame thrower. Schulze didn't hesitate. He launched a great kick at his rump. "You too!" he yelled. "March or croak, that's what you always used to shout. Now, that's just what it is!"

In the light of the flares they ran across the field, straight into the deadly barrage. They ran, dropped to the ground, got up and ran some more. A mine exploded. Someone screamed. They sprang over the mutilated man and pelted on.

They hit what appeared to be a trench system. Suddenly von Dodenburg found himself facing a Belgian soldier. He recognized the Great War helmet. His father had a similar one in his study. Instinctively he fired, although the man had raised his hands in surrender. The man flew back, his stomach torn apart by the burst at such close range. The next moment he tripped and sprawled full length, his foot caught in a tangle of barbed-wire.

At the same instant Metzger pressed the trigger of his flame thrower. A great tongue of flame shot out. Twenty yards ahead two enemy soldiers were suddenly transformed into living torches. One dropped immediately, writhing frantically. The other came running on, blinded by the flames, his outstretched arms blazing fiercely. Suddenly he dropped to the ground, his

black bubbling head lying in a puddle of flickering fire. Schulze dragged him to his feet. "Come on," he gasped. "We're nearly there now!"

The two of them ran past an abandoned machine gun. A big black face poked up out of a hole. The lips muttered something in a kind of bastard French. Von Dodenburg could just make out the word 'pity'. But in the rage of blood which had now possessed him he had no pity. He fired a burst at the Congolese and the black face disappeared in a welter of blood.

The way was barred by a small pillbox. At first they thought it was abandoned, but the sudden burst of fire which killed a corporal just behind von Dodenburg soon told them that it wasn't.

"Flame thrower – quick!" Schulze snarled and pushed the Butcher forward. "Come on, you great lover, you!"

Metzger stumbled forward and pressed the trigger. There was a soft whoosh. Flames curled round the pillbox. The metal cupola glowed dully but nothing happened.

"Give them it again!" Schulze yelled.

This time it worked. Half a dozen Belgians came running out, coughing and blinded, their arms raised in surrender. Someone mowed them down with a single burst.

Now they were through the Belgian outer line. The firing gave way to a solitary rifle shot and the occasional angry short burst of machine gun fire. They were through the minefield too, but at a terrible cost. As they slowed down to a walk, their chests heaving, the sweat pouring down their faces, von Dodenburg could just make out the dark figures of his men on each side; and in spite of the darkness, he could see enough to tell him that he had lost half his command in the last fifteen minutes. Weakly he indicated that they should continue their advance towards the dark outline of the Fort on the horizon. Behind them in the minefield, a high hysterical voice kept calling, "Comrades, for God's sake, don't leave me!"

The voice grew fainter and fainter until finally it died away altogether.

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Fifteen minutes later they linked up with the paras. It was a totally undramatic moment. A round, rimless paratroop helmet popped up from a ditch next to the wall of the Fort and a voice said, "What the hell took you so long?"

CHAPTER 15

The handful of bearded, begrimed paras had set up a position between a wrecked DFS 230 glider, which had landed on top of the Fort, and a bunker which they managed to put out of action with their hollow charges. Whenever their own artillery or that of the Belgians fired on them, they fled into the bunker, but for the rest of the time they preferred to be outside. As the para sergeant in charge explained. "It's funny in there and the men don't like it. If you listen carefully, you can hear the Belgies down below in the underground galleries. Hundreds of them there are." He shrugged. "The men prefer to be outside in the open even though the Belgies have brought their artillery down on us twice during the day."

Von Dodenburg nodded his understanding. "And what about trying to get into the galleries?" he asked.

"Not possible, Lieutenant. We've run out of hollow charges. All we've got is our machine pistols and rifles."

"Grenades?" von Dodenburg queried. The para sergeant was exhausted. He realised that. They had pulled off one of the most amazing feats in modern warfare by landing right on top of Europe's most powerful fort and they had fought it out with an enemy who outnumbered them by the hundreds. He could not be too critical of their present lack of initiative.

"We used them in batches of three to knock out the guns in the turret below us," the para sergeant explained. "Some of the lads shinned along the gun barrels, hung them at the muzzles and got out of the way fast!"

Von Dodenburg rose from the slit trench. "Sergeant, come on with me into the turret, where we can see. I want you to explain something to me."

Crouched low, they doubled over to the bunker, where what was left of von Dodenburg's men lay sprawled out, exhausted, against the walls, while Schulze tended a dying soldier who had been shot in the lower abdomen. He turned when the two of them came in, his once ruddy face pale and drawn.

"How is he?" von Dodenburg asked.

Schulze shook his head and gave him the thumbs-down sign. "The bullet got him in the balls, sir. I'm surprised he's survived so long."

The young officer accepted the news without comment. The time for sympathy was past. Too many men had died in the last few hours in Assault

Battalion Wotan. Now he felt utterly drained of emotion. All he could think of was to take their objective and then fall into a bed and sleep. Sleep, sleep, sleep, for ever and a day. "Do what you can for him. Make it easy," he said to Schulze and made the gesture of pressing home the plunger of a hypodermic.

Schulze nodded. He knew what he meant. Pump a dose of morphia into the wounded boy, enough to kill him painlessly.

Von Dodenburg sat down next to the para sergeant, pulling over the candle. "All right, sergeant, clue me in, if you would."

Slowly, with the exaggerated precision of the overtired, the para sergeant raised his finger and began to trace in the outline of their section of the fort with his dirty forefinger in the dust on the floor. "We're here. Below us there is a gallery, running in this direction, if I'm guessing right. Two gun emplacements run off that gallery – the one I told you we knocked out and the other which is still operating."

"You mean Thirty?"

"Yes, I suppose it's Thirty."

Von Dodenburg absorbed the information, staring at his own shadow flickering in the light of the candle on the wall. It seemed to take his brain a long time to digest it. Behind him the dying soldier groaned softly as Schulze plunged the needle into his arm. A moment later his head slipped to one side and his breath started to come in grunts, as if he were snoring. Schulze stretched out painfully against the wall next to the Butcher, whose exhausted face was black with smoke.

There was silence in the bunker, broken only by the dying man's breathing and the soft burr of the enemy soldiers talking far below them. Von Dodenburg jerked his head up suddenly. He had almost fallen asleep, squatting, there, trying to sort out what to do next.

Wearily he rubbed his eyes, which seemed filled with large grains of sand. "You mean that the gallery," he began, his words slurred like those of a drunk. "No, I mean, the gun emplacement you knocked out – it runs off the gallery below."

The para sergeant nodded.

"Is there any way to get into that gun emplacement? Sergeant, I'm speaking to you!"

The para sergeant jerked up his head sharply. He, too, had fallen asleep, just sitting there. "Through the gun ports – perhaps, if you had a charge."

"How big a charge?"

"God," the para sergeant complained, rubbing his filthy hand over his face. "I don't know." His eyes closed again.

Von Dodenburg grabbed him by the collar and shook him roughly. "Sergeant, I asked you a question! How much?"

"A small one – a bundle of four or five hand grenades. Tied together, they might pull it off."

Von Dodenburg relaxed his grip. The para sergeant slumped back against the wall. The next moment he was fast asleep, snoring loudly, his mouth wide open.

"Five hand grenades," he whispered to himself. "Just five." Slowly a plan began to form in his mind. By dawn he wanted to be in the gallery below, ready to start the job of putting the gun emplacements out of action. He looked at the luminous dial of his watch. He had exactly ten hours left before the German Army started to cross the Meuse in force. If SS Assault Battalion Wotan did not have the guns knocked out by then, the crossing would be a massacre.

***

"All right, von Dodenburg," Schwarz whispered, as the raiding party crouched on the top of the Fort, "everything's ready."

"Fine." Kuno jerked at the rough-and-ready rope they had made from the seat harnesses of the wrecked glider. It seemed all right. He settled the bundle of grenades more comfortably. "Ready to go."

"Look out down there, sir," Schulze said anxiously. "It's going to be tricky."

Von Dodenburg smiled."I will, don't fear. I'll be back to make a soldier out of you yet."

He took a last look at the luminous dial of his watch. They had five hours at the most till dawn. "Let her go," he ordered, trying to hide the fear in his voice.

The men took the strain. The next moment he was over the side and they were playing out the improvised rope. Rapidly Kuno sank out of sight in the darkness. Thirty feet, forty, fifty. The wind seemed to have increased in strength. Hanging there on the face of the great Fort, he felt it tug at his body. Seventy feet. He came to a sudden stop. The thin cord tied to his wrist jerked hard. It was the agreed signal. He had reached the required depth. He must

now be, level with the upper gun turret, the one the paras had knocked out.

He took a deep breath and looked down. The faint silver sheen below was the Albert Canal. If he made a wrong move now, that was where he would end up. He licked his lips, reached up and caught the tough webbing of the harness with both hands.

"All right, you bastard," he said, "swing!"

Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the makeshift rope began to move back and forth along the face of the man-made cliff. He started to gain momentum. Like a pendulum his body swung across the sheer face, striking the rough concrete with ever increasing frequency as the arc grew larger and larger. He gasped as his body was buffeted by the concrete, but he forced himself to continue, his teeth clenched with pain. Somewhere – perhaps another ten yards to his right – the silent 75 mm cannon were protruding into the night. He must secure a hold on them. He must!

Up above on the plateau, the SS men sweated, their eyes bulging with the strain, their heels dug deep into the soil, as the pressure on their arm muscles and burning palms mounted. They could no longer see von Dodenburg, but they could hear him as he struck the concrete time and time again.

Far below, von Dodenburg swung in a great arc through the wind which now seemed to be howling around him, grabbing at his battered body, eager to pluck him away from his fragile perch. Twice he struck his head against a piece of concrete and was only saved from losing consciousness by his helmet. Then suddenly he saw the first of the twin cannon, its muzzle splayed open where the paras had exploded their charges. Relying completely on the men above, he took his hands off the rope and grabbed for it. His nails scraped against the cold metal and then he was swinging back in the opposite direction. He tried again. And again, still to no avail! The tips of his fingers were bleeding and blunt now, without any feeling. He felt his strength ebbing rapidly. Clenching his teeth, knowing that the men could not bear the strain much longer, he came in again, the wind whistling past with almost gale-like force. He held his hands ready. The first gun loomed up. Stretching his arms to their full extent, straining with every fibre of his body, he lunged for it. His hands caught, slipped and caught again. A nail gave and he felt an electric shock of agony shoot up his arm, but he held on. Then with the last of his strength he heaved himself on to the top of the great cannon and hung there like a sack, his unseeing eyes staring down at the silver gleam of the Albert

Canal far below.

For what seemed ages but, in reality, was only a matter of thirty seconds he lay there. Then he forced himself to pull the cord to signal to the men up top that he had done it. Sitting astride the gun, he began to work his way towards the turret. He reached it safely and by stretching out far to the right, he could see that the para sergeant had not lied.

There was a fairly sizeable observation port there. Gingerly he reached his hand into it and felt for the far side. He judged it to be thirty by thirty centimetres. Too tight for even the slimmest man among the survivors of 2nd Company. But give it another ten centimetres and even the bull-like Metzger would be able to get through.

He fumbled for the grenades, expertly tied together with a piece of wire by the para sergeant who had also fixed the five second fuse; like all the men who had landed on top of the Fort by glider he was a trained engineer. Biting his bottom lip, he transferred them to his left hand. One slip and they'd be gone for ever, exploding purposelessly in the Canal far below.

He managed it and by straining out, he placed them in the aperture and pulled the fuse. He clambered madly back over the first gun and the second, swung round the corner of the turret and pressed his body against the rough concrete. Just in time. The five grenades exploded with a muffled trump. A hot wind hit him in the face. Chunks of concrete sailed through the air and a few moments later he heard them hitting the water far below. He raised his head and waited for the angry shouts and the burst of machine gun fire. Nothing happened. No shouts, no bullets. Possibly the Belgies had taken the explosion for another German shell.

Cautiously von Dodenburg, suspicious of a trap, began to edge his way back to the aperture. The smoke was clearing away now to reveal the jagged shattered sides. He squeezed his head and shoulders into the enlarged hole. They went through easily and he signalled to the others to start coming down. Five minutes later the whole raiding party was crowded into the abandoned gun turret, staring round curiously in the thin blue light of Schwarz's torch.

***

Schwarz took the lead, machine pistol clutched at his hip. The little SS officer seemed utterly fearless. Twice he led them past posts occupied by the enemy, the light escaping from below the doors and the low murmur of tired voices

indicating that Belgians were inside and awake; neither time had he shown the least sign of fear. Once a dark shape had shot out in front of them in the poorly-lit corridor, its size magnified enormously on the wall ahead by the light of Schwarz's torch. Schwarz did not seem to notice. His eyes empty of any expression, his face covered with blood and grime, he led them deeper and deeper into the interior of the great Fort, the only sound that of their own boots, now covered with their socks, and the steady throb of the air conditioning like the beat of some monstrous heart.

Suddenly Schwarz switched off his torch. "Against the wall," he hissed. "Someone coming!"

Hearts beating frantically, they pressed themselves against the damp, dripping concrete, their eyes focused on the swinging arcs of light coming closer and closer.

"No firing," von Dodenburg whispered.

Schulze, who was close behind Schwarz, clubbed his fist in anticipation. Schwarz crouched, a bayonet held tight to his side.

A great shadow swung into sight. And another. They preceded their owners like silent giants. Von Dodenburg gave a sigh of relief. Just the two of them!

"Ici... la bas!" Schwarz called in his best French, just as the first man came into sight.

The Belgian corporal paused, startled. "Pardon," he said apologetically and clicked off the torch, as if he feared to blind Schwarz. In that same instant, the Lieutenant's bayonet slid into his side between his ribs. His mouth shot open but Schwarz's dirty hand clamped over it. His knees buckled beneath him and he sagged to the floor, the torch clattered from his hand on to the concrete.

At the same moment Schulze clubbed the other man behind the ear and, reaching up, grabbed the back of his helmet. He pulled hard. The helmet slid down, its strap falling around the Belgian's throat. Schulze's knee shot into the small of his back. With both his huge hands he tugged at the back of he helmet. The strap bit into the soldier's throat. His scream died in a sudden strangled groan. Desperately his hand clawed at the strap and tried to break the killing hold. Wriggling frantically, while Schulze held on grimly, his eyes bulging in an ecstasy of fear, he flung himself from side to side. Slowly Schulze garrotted him to death. His knees buckled as, gently, almost tenderly, Schulze lowered him to the ground. "The poor bastard's dead," he whispered.

While they clustered round the two dead Belgians, running their filthy hands through their pockets in search of cigarettes, they did not see the third man, who slipped away, fearfully and noiselessly, to report the presence of these bloody begrimed invaders.

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They were deep within the fort now. The chatter of its machine guns and the occasional crump of its guns were muted by the depth, whereas the sound of the Fort's machinery was getting louder by the second. Von Dodenburg held up his hand. They stopped and he pointed to a ladder directly in front of them, clamped to the cement, next to the legend DEFENSE DE FUMER. On both sides of the steel ladder there were open-doored life shafts like the 'pater noster' open-faced lifts used in North Germany. "Shell hoists going down from the magazine to the gun turret," he explained softly.

Schulze was first off the mark. "Let's get that bastard straight off," he urged.

"How?"

Schulze grinned. "Every time a machine stopped in the docks in Hamburg the workers got a coffee break. And on Monday morning after a night on the Reeperbahn – that's our red-light district – the machines stopped a lot." He turned to the others crowded behind him in the shadows. "All right, everyone grab a handful of that cement dirt there and follow me." He suited his actions to his words and at a nod from von Dodenburg, the others started to do the same.

Grinning broadly, Schulze threw the cement dirt down inside the polished metal runner at each side of the hoist. "Down here," he said. "We'll need a lot of this crap to do it. If I could get down to the engine, especially if it were gasoline, a handful of sugar and the whole thing would seize up just like that." He clicked his thumb and forefinger loudly. "But this lot'll do just as good once it gets into the works."

Hurriedly man after man threw a couple of handfuls of the cement dirt into the shaft. Even Schwarz snapped out of his strange mood long enough to do the same.

Slowly the shell hoist came to a grinding halt. Schulze winked at von Dodenburg. "Now what do you say to that, Lieutenant? Ain't that the neatest bit of sabotage you've ever seen?"

"Damn terrorist! I think I shall report you to the Gestapo. If we ever get out of here alive," he added, but there was laughter in his voice. "All right, you've given your star performance, Schulze. Let's get down to the rough stuff." He gripped his machine pistol aggressively. "That gun turret down there has got to be put out of action."

They ran down the tunnel until they came to the stairs. At the bottom was another tunnel, dripping with the moisture that seeped through the earth, its concrete walls covered with nitre. They ran along the slippery duckboards. Twice Metzger, more ungainly than the younger men, slipped and fell. No one helped him to his feet. They all knew now that the ex-Sergeant-Major faced some serious charge or other if they ever got out of this alive.

Suddenly the tunnel curved sharply to the right. Von Dodenburg in the lead stopped just in time. A great steel door stood in front of them, sharp white light cutting into the dim yellow of the tunnel. "Emplacement number forty-six," he whispered.

As if to lend emphasis to his words, there was a great crash from behind the door. Although it was probably several inches thick, it trembled violently as if it were made of matchwood. The next instant the tunnel was filled with thick yellow smoke that tore at their lungs. It was followed by a monstrous clanging noise that made their hands to fly to their ears to keep the blast out. Von Dodenburg felt as if his skull were going to split apart any moment. He staggered violently against the wall and supported himself there, his body bent, the tears streaming down his face, coughing as if he would bring his very lungs up.

Schwarz, who had not received the full impact of the blast from the twin cannon in the turret, took over. "Metzger – Schulze – cover me, I'm going in!"

Without waiting to see if they were indeed doing so, he levelled up his machine pistol and crashed his foot against the steel door. Surprisingly enough it swung open. Obviously it was well oiled as part of the safety measures taken against sudden flash fires.

The gunners, their heads protected by asbestos flash guards under their helmets, were grouped round the hoist. In the thick yellow smoke they were gesticulating angrily at each other, obviously placing the blame for the failure of the hoist on one another. With their ears covered by the thick asbestos, they did not hear Schwarz till it was too late.

A fat sergeant, with the yellow face of a man who had been in the

fortress artillery too long, swung round and saw him. His hand reached for his pistol, but he never drew it.

Schwarz fired and the sergeant crashed against the concrete wall.

He fired again, swinging his body from left to right. The Belgian artillerymen were shot where they stood, galvanised momentarily into electric action, like puppets in the hands of a mad puppet-master, before they fell to the floor. It was all over within a matter of seconds. As the chattering of the machine pistol died away, the last enemy soldier collapsed on to the floor.

Like a man mesmerised, Schwarz remained standing in the position of firing, legs astride, machine pistol clasped to his side, as if he expected the men he had just killed to rise up and he would have to begin the slaughter all over again.

"Oh, my aching back," Schulze gasped, staring at the little officer's face, "he's gone combat crazy! Lieutenant Schwarz is out of his mind!"

"Hold your trap," von Dodenburg snapped.

Almost gently he placed his hands on the still-smoking machine pistol and pressed it slowly downward. "It's all right, Schwarz, it's all right."

Schwarz shook his head. "What's the matter?" he asked. "What are you doing?"

"My dear Schwarz, it's all right," von Dodenburg said soothingly.

Of course, it's all right," Schwarz snapped. "What are you talking about. We've just taken Turret Forty-Six, haven't we?"

Then von Dodenburg knew that Lieutenant Kurt Schwarz was crazy, irrevocably crazy for all time.

CHAPTER 16

Commandant Jottrand's face looked white even in the harsh yellow light of the naked bulb that hung in its wire cage on the ceiling. "What did you say?" he rapped at the soldier who had brought him the news.

"There were about thirty of them," the soldier gasped in his heavily accented French. "All Boche." He made the 'eh' sound like 'sch'. Major Jottrand noted that the man was a Fleming and thought again how easy the Germans had it – one great nation united behind a single leader and all speaking the same language. He, for his part, the commander of his nation's greatest fort, had to deal with two linguistic groups who hated each other bitterly and refused to function unless they were in a company composed of their own kind. What a crazy army the Belgian Army was, especially when its commander-in-chief, the King himself, was suspected of being pro-German!

"Where were they heading?"

"To Casement Forty-Six," a voice at the door announced.

"What the devil is the meaning of this, Baer?" Commandant Jottrand snapped.

Lieutenant Baer, a Fleming himself, nodded for the private to leave; then he sprang to attention. "Sir, I beg to report that the enemy has taken Number Forty-Six. They have destroyed the hoists and are believed to be on their way to Number Forty-Five."

Wearily Jottrand waved for him to relax. "I am sorry, Baer. My nerves, and the atmosphere inside here. It's been thirty-six hours since I've seen daylight," he added by way of explanation.

"I understand, sir," Baer snapped.

Jottrand collected himself quickly and was beginning to rap out his orders when his words were drowned by the noise of an explosion. Little bits of plaster and cement fell on his balding pate. The walls trembled and a little wave of dust swept under the door.

"You know what that was, don't you, Baer?" he said when the noise had died away.

Baer bit his lip and nodded.

"Number Forty-Five," Jottrand said, a thin smile on his lips, as if the

words gave him some kind of masochistic pleasure. "And if we don't stop the bastards soon, thirty-six, twenty-three and seventeen will follow." He laughed drily. "One doesn't need to be a clairvoyant to know what they're after."

"You mean, *mon Commandant*, that the Boche are going to cross the Meuse to our north and those people below are trying to put out our guns covering that sector?"

"Exactly," Jottrand's lips tightened. "But they're not going to do it. I fought them in the last war and beat them and I'm going to do the same in this one. Right, where was I? I want everyone not on the guns to be formed into a provisional company – cooks, clerks, civilian cleaners too, if you can find them. Anyone who can fire a rifle, do you understand?"

"Yes sir, and then?"

Jottrand glanced at his watch hastily, "In exactly fifteen minutes I shall ask for a barrage from the 7th Infantry Division. I am going to ask them to bring it down right on top of us. I shall swat the Boche off us like a cow does with its tail. Then we counter-attack." Dramatically in the Latin-fashion, against which Baer's Fleming soul rebelled instinctively, he rose to his feet, every inch the traditional Gallic warrior. "Lieutenant Baer, we must drive them out of Fort Eben Emael. It is for the honour of the Army and the future of our nation."

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The Belgian counter-attack caught von Dodenburg's little force by complete surprise.

They had just captured Number Thirty-Six and spiked its guns by smashing their firing pins against the walls and were advancing again down the dark corridor towards their next objective when the enemy machine gun opened up at point blank range. The leading three men were cut down at once and von Dodenburg was slammed against the wall, blood pouring from his shoulder. The next instant the massed artillery of the Belgian 7th Infantry Division hit the outside of the fort. Eben Emael rocked like a ship in a heavy sea. Fragments of concrete came tumbling down from the ceiling. The walls groaned under the strain and a fog of dust rose from the floor.

But the machine gun kept up its deadly fire. As the lead cut into them, they were bowled down the corridor, legs and arms flailing in the horrible disjointedness of violent death. Schulze yelled as a bullet whacked into his

thigh, and sat down. The Butcher, a neat hole drilled through the back of his hand, stood in the middle of the panic-stricken mob.

"Get down you silly bastard!" Schulze shrieked. He grabbed the Butcher's ankle, tugged hard and the ex-sergeant-major fell to the ground among the dead and dying. An instant later a hail of bullets ripped open the wall just behind where he had been standing.

Von Dodenburg shook his head to fight off the nausea that was threatening to swamp him. Ahead were a dozen enemy soldiers grouped behind a machine gun in a makeshift barricade which blocked the corridor. Beyond them every recess was lined with armed men. Their way was barred.

Still Schwarz remained on his feet, firing his machine pistol, teeth bared, murder glaring out of his eyes. A fresh explosion up above rocked the corridor. He swayed violently. Von Dodenburg grabbed his arm and nearly shrieked with pain. "Get down, you damn fool!" he roared above the noise.

"We've got to get through," Schwarz screamed, fitting a fresh magazine to his Schmeisser. "The turrets – the Sixth Army!"

"I know, I know!" von Dodenburg yelled and kicked Schwarz hard on the side of the leg.

As he fell, von Dodenburg flung himself on top of him, the lead cutting the air just above his head. "Stay there," he cried and felt a sickening thud as a slug struck the back of his helmet. "We can't get through that barricade. They'd slaughter us." He rolled clear and shouted at the same time. "Everybody back up the corridor – round the bend! We'll cover you! Schwarz, start firing!"

He couldn't use his own machine pistol because of his shoulder, but he groped for his Walther and holding it awkwardly in his left hand, he joined in as Schwarz blazed a long burst at the machine gunner. Hurriedly the survivors scurried for cover, while the two officers backed down the corridor littered with their own dead, firing as they went. A few seconds later they had made it. Von Dodenburg collapsed on the ground, his head bent in exhaustion and defeat. The Belgians had stopped them after all!

The stuttering of the machine gun stopped abruptly. Above them the guns also went quiet. Von Dodenburg forced himself to sit up. He held his arm above his head in an attempt to stop the bleeding. The right side of his jacket was already soggy with blood, but the wound continued to bleed. He blinked a couple of times and stared round at his men. Of the two hundred-strong 2nd Company which had gone into action thirty-odd hours before,

only thirty were still alive. The thought of the mass slaughter of those terrible hours made him feel sick. With a last effort of willpower, he pulled himself together and forced himself to think. What the devil was he going to do?

Leaning weakly against the opposite wall, the Butcher had thrown off his heavy flame thrower and was moaning piteously, holding his wounded hand.

"Knock it off, you fat bastard," Schulze cried. "Those Belgies nearly blasted my balls off and I'm not complaining! You and your little scratch!"

He broke off suddenly at the sound of heavy hobnailed boots grating cautiously on the concrete round the bend. Someone was coining. They waited tensely, their hands gripping their weapons.

"Listen you Germans!" a hoarse voice called in excellent German. "You'd better submit. You haven't got a chance. We'll give you five minutes to make up your mind."

The voice was suddenly strangely muffled. "And here's a sample of what's coming your way if you don't."

A small round object sailed round the corner and struck the wall.

"Grenade!" someone screamed.

Frantically they flattened themselves on the ground, but the deadly little egg did not explode. Instead it lay there. A sudden hiss, and it was giving off a thick wet cloud of what looked like smoke.

Surprisingly enough it was the Butcher who reacted to the strange phenomenon first. With his good hand he grabbed the little metal egg and flung it back the way it had come. The next moment he started to cough horribly. The man next to him, who had also breathed in the thick fumes followed suit a moment later, his body bent double as he tried to force air into his smoke-filled lungs.

Schulze looked at von Dodenburg, his face distorted with horror. "Gas," he shrieked. "It's Gas, Sir!"

Von Dodenburg felt a thrill of fear run through him. "Gas!" he echoed. "They wouldn't dare!" But the faint smell of bitter almonds told him they would. He had left his own gas mask behind on the plateau before he had been lowered to the first turret. But most of the men had their corrugated metal gas mask containers fixed to their belts. "Take out your masks," he ordered, realising that they would survive while he would be slowly choked to death by the fumes.

"I haven't got one!" someone screamed in panic.

"I haven't either."

"I've got a bottle of cognac in my container!"

From all sides the scared voices confirmed that the men had done exactly what their predecessors had done during the Polish campaign – they had dumped the heavy gas masks as an unnecessary burden and filled the container with extra food, personal possessions or drink.

"All right, all right." Von Dodenburg held up his good hand to stop the panic. He knew that if he didn't calm them, they would break completely; then nothing could stop them surrendering. He remembered what his father's battalion had done when the chemicals had begun to give out in their primitive masks during an Allied gas attack in 1918. "There's no reason to panic. There's a way out. All of you, get a rag. Anything big enough to make a mask to cover your mouth. Hurry!"

He suited his actions to his words by tearing a strip from his shirt. The next instant he ripped open his flies and poised himself over the rag, his legs astride. Now piss on it!" He picked up the sodden rag and without hesitation tied it around his mouth with one hand.

Urgently they followed his example. Frantic with fear they tore at their clothing. Flies were jerked open as they crouched and urinated over the handkerchiefs or bits of shirt, and wrapped them around their mouths in panic-stricken haste.

Just in time. The first of the bombs came whining into their part of the corridor. Almost before it rolled to a stop, Schwarz kicked it neatly back the way it had come. But there were more.

In spite of the improvised masks, the thick fumes started to creep into their lungs. As more and more of the deadly little eggs landed in their midst, masking their feet in a thick white fog, their lungs began to sting. Von Dodenburg coughed. It felt as if a red-hot rod had been poked into them. His eyes smarted. Tears started to blind him. He ripped at his collar. He was choking. The fog rose higher. A man screamed and before anyone could stop him, he had broken away and was pelting round the bend towards the enemy.

He didn't make it. The machine gun chattered. He flung up his hands despairingly and skidded to a stop. For one long moment he stood there before he started to sink into the thick white fog.

Another man collapsed to his knees, his mask askew, a thin bloody foam forming on his lips where he had bitten them in his last desperate attempt not to breathe in the killing fumes. Slowly but inevitably his knees

began to sink to the ground. Von Dodenburg watched with horrified fascination, as if mesmerised by the scene, the coughs racking his body, tears streaming down his cheeks. He was going himself now. He could feel his knees start to buckle beneath him. He was as weak as a child. He grasped his throat and tried to stop the gas penetrating his lungs. A great red night threatened to overcome him. All around him they were sinking now. As if in a slow-motion film, the machine pistol slipped from Schwarz's nerveless fingers and clattered to the floor. Above his mask, Schwarz's crazy eyes rolled upwards. His knees started to give. Slowly he, too, began to sink into the fog.

Suddenly a well-remembered Prussian voice penetrated the red mist which threatened to submerge von Dodenburg. It was far, far away. But there was no mistaking it. A small figure, with a blood-stained bandage around his head, thrust past the dying officer. He looked ghastly in his black mask with the steamed-up eye piece. He dropped the cane he was carrying and seized the flame thrower the top of which stuck up above the grey-white fog. With frenzied fingers, he ripped off what was left of his torn jacket and flung it to the floor. As the great blast of cool, clean air streamed in from somewhere and the mixed bunch of masked paras and SS men stormed through the ranks of the gassed 2nd Company, the Vulture strapped on the flame thrower. He waved his hand. The sign for forward attack.

While the men on the floor gulped in great breaths of fresh air, the Vulture swung round the bend, followed by the survivors of the bombardment on the surface of Fort Eben Emael. He pressed the trigger and a vicious red flame shot out and wrapped itself round the barrier. He fired again. The machine gun glowed a dull red. The corridor echoed with the Belgians' screams. But the Vulture showed no mercy. He fired again. The survivors were fleeing up the corridor now, clawing at each other frantically to escape the all consuming flame, while behind them the bodies of the gunners fused to their weapon, grotesquely distorted by the tremendous heat, shrivelled up like 'little black pigmies', as the Army demonstration sergeant had predicted so confidently in what seemed another age.

CHAPTER 17

It was zero four hundred. In another thirty minutes it would be dawn, the time set by Captain Geier for their last attack on the two remaining turrets. Now the corridor, littered with the bodies of their own men and the charred corpses of the enemy, was silent save for the occasional crack and whine of bullets, fired by some cunning Belgian sniper, doing some nice deflection shooting further up the passage. But with little success; the men of 2nd Company, Assault Battalion Wotan were sprawled out on the floor, recovering from the exertions of the last few hours.

Schulze thrust in another plug and watched carefully as it began to fill with blood from the wound in von Dodenburg's shoulder. It was the third he had made from the spare pair of underpants, which he had been carrying in his gas mask container, together with several blue-coloured packets of contraceptives, type YUMAN 'guaranteed to withstand the most severe eruption', as the makers claimed.

"Just in case, sir," he had explained. "Clean drawers and a Parisian, and you're well away, fit for any fighting situation. I think the bleeding's stopping now, sir."

"Thank you, Schulze. I think you're right."

The Vulture, his face still red where the mask had been, a rim of black across the ridge of his monstrous nose making him look even more like his namesake, pushed his way through to them. "How's it going, von Dodenburg?" he asked, his only concern the fact that a useful officer might be unable to take part in the last stage of the operation.

"Fair, sir. The bleeding's beginning to stop."

"Fine." The Vulture indicated that Schulze was no longer needed.

Painfully Schulze rose to his feet and left the two officers.

The Vulture shivered in the dank cold of the corridor. He was still without his jacket. Vaguely von Dodenburg noted how thin his arms were ; looked like those of an undernourished child. But, in spite of his head wound and his frail body, he showed no sign of exhaustion. Almost immediately he launched into his plan for the final stage, while von Dodenburg listened the best he could, his head threatening to burst at any moment.

The Butcher, squatting miserably on his own in the darker part of the

corridor, watched the two officers closely. The two of them would soon decide his fate, if he managed to survive the mess they were in. He blinked a couple of times and fought back the tears of self-pity which came to his eyes. *After all I've done for the shits,* he thought wretchedly. *Built up the company for them, got myself wounded and now they want to throw me on the scrapheap or worse.* He sniffed and felt in the Vulture's discarded jacket in case the CO had left one of his fine cigars there.

The Vulture hadn't but Metzger's hand fell on something else – a photograph which the CO had obviously had in his possession a long time; its edges were crumpled and worn, as if he had kept it in his wallet or identity document. Slowly and without any great curiosity, he turned it over.

What he saw made him sit bolt upright. There were two men looking out at him from the yellowing photograph, smiling with creased brows as if they were looking into the sun. The Vulture was obviously much younger when it had been taken; he still had most of his hair. But it was not the men's faces which made Metzger's little red eyes nearly pop out of his head, nor their completely naked bodies; it was the blatant obscenity of what they were doing to each other.

He cast a quick glance at the little Captain crouched next to von Dodenburg. Now he knew why the CO was not married; it was not just wholehearted devotion to duty. Now he knew too what the Vulture did on those semi-annual leaves to Berlin, from which he returned with dark circles under his eyes, morose, silent and drained of his usual energy.

The Butcher was not a very intelligent man. Most of those who knew him thought that he was indeed very stupid. But in spite of his lack of brainpower, he realised immediately that he had a greater treasure in his possession than –mentally, he sought for a comparison – than the handwritten copy of the fabled first version of *Mein Kampf*, which the Führer had composed during his imprisonment in Landsberg Prison.

He realised, with a warm glow of relief, that with the photograph in his possession, he was saved. He stuffed it in his jacket pocket and patted it a couple of times to reassure himself that it was safely stowed away.

***

It was nearly dawn now and time for the last attack. Schulze had finished checking the magazine of his Schmeisser. He had taken off his jacket and

was pulling off the last shreds of his ruined shirt. Idly, savouring the last moments of inactivity before the killing started again, von Dodenburg watched him. Suddenly Schulze turned his body and revealed his back. It was covered with ugly, red weals.

"Where did you get those marks?" von Dodenburg asked curiously.

"They're nothing, sir," he said hesitantly.

"Nothing indeed! Where did you get them?"

"From a radiator – in Neuengamme Concentration Camp."

"What did you say?"

Schulze hesitated. How could he explain that miserable, terrible summer of 1938 when the Gestapo had broken into his father's illegal printing shop in Barmbek and found the anti-Nazi leaflets? The silly old bastard with his socialist principles and crappy leaflets about the rise in the price of butter under the Nazis! Who in hell cared? But the Gestapo did. Within the hour, he had been arrested with the rest of the family.

They had come to arrest him at the docks, four of them in ankle-length leather coats, with their hats pulled down over their faces like detectives in the movies. As soon as they had got him inside the dark-green police Mercedes, all four of them had begun to beat him up in a stolid, dogged, routine sort of way.

The beating had been nothing new to him. It was the usual way the Hamburg police made their arrests, and it wasn't the first time he had experienced this *erste Abreibung* – 'the first rubbing-down'. The gigantic cops who manned the Reeperbahn's notorious St David's Police Station had given him the same going-over a couple of times when he had been dragged in there on a charge of being drunk and disorderly during one of his periodic pay-day binges.

But what had happened to him next out in Neuengamme had been completely different – the black-clad guards and their black alsatians which would bite the balls off a prisoner at their command, the beatings with the whips made of bull pizzles, Sergeant Lohmeyer, the one-legged veteran of the 1923 Munich Putsch, who made the prisoners open their mouths so that he could piss in them when he was drunk, which was most of the time. How did he explain that?

"Go on, Schulze," von Dodenburg prompted, "What happened?"

"Two of the bastards held me against a radiator when it was red-hot. Fifty degrees they said it was. The bastards – wish I had 'em here now with

this here machine pistol in my hands."

"But didn't you report them? Torture is illegal. Good grief man, things like that can't happen in the Third Reich!"

Schulze looked cynically at the young officer's earnest face. "You don't know the half of it, sir," he said. "I could tell you things about our well-organized Greater German state..." He broke off suddenly and shrugged. "But no one would believe me. They'd say it could never happen."

Von Dodenburg knew he was skating on thin ice, but his outraged sense of justice drove him on. "What do you mean no one would believe you? Of course they will, if you're telling the truth! Who did that terrible thing to your back, Schulze?"

Something snapped in the big, good-humoured Hamburger. He leaned forward. "I'll tell you, sir, who did it. A big fat perverted bastard, who calls himself an old fighter. A long-time member of our glorious National Socialist Party and possessor of the *Blood Order*, who can only get it up when he beats some bastard of a prisoner!"

"But what formation did he belong to?" von Dodenburg persisted. Schulze laughed bitterly. "What formation? Hell, sir, the arse-hole wears the same uniform as we do!" He looked the shocked officer in the eyes. "He's in the SS."

Von Dodenburg's mouth fell open. "Impossible," he breathed almost inaudible. "Impossible."

And then the Vulture was calling them together for the last attack.

***

"Go," Captain Geier yelled.

"Go!" Lieutenant von Dodenburg shrieked.

They charged forward up the corridor into the unknown, screaming hoarse obscenities.

The Belgians were waiting for them. The first SS man crumpled like a deflated paper bag. Another screamed and clapped his hands to his eyes. But the Belgians were no match for the SS. They stormed the makeshift barrier at the end of the corridor within seconds.

Drunk with blood lust and eager to die, they stabbed and cut on all sides. Belgian hand grenades burst with hollow detonations. Red-hot shards of metal hissed through the air. Men cursed. Men screamed. Men died.

Lieutenant Schwarz booted open the door of what looked like a supply room. Splay-legged he sprayed the terrified men crouching among the bins, screaming crazily. They went down like summer wheat before the harvester.

They stormed into the first turret. The gunners, horrified at this crazy pack of filthy, bloody, ragged giants, put up their arms. They shot two and the rest were beaten and kicked out of the way while a volunteer loaded two shells into the cannon and pulled the lanyard. The great cannon exploded with a tremendous roar, a neat split down the length of its barrel. When the smoke cleared, the Belgians were slumped against the wall, bleeding from nose and ears. On the floor, the volunteer lay unconscious, both his hands neatly severed. All that was left were two bleeding stumps. They left him to bleed to death and ran on.

Geier, still carrying the bulk of the flame thrower, pressed the trigger for the last time. It belched at a group of Belgians trying to make a stand. The flame rushed down the corridor and swept them away as if they had never been there. When they ran on this time, their hobnails crunched over what sounded like cinders.

Schulze howled like a mad dog. He threw one of his captured Belgian egg grenades into a group of the enemy fleeing up the corridor. It exploded in their midst and they were bowled over, screaming horribly. He trampled over them.

Then they burst into the last turret where the gunners surrendered immediately. Now the *blutrausch* had evaporated. They quietly disarmed the Belgians and with hands that fluttered uncontrollably, they indicated that the prisoners should line up against the opposite wall. They weren't even kicked to hurry them up.

Von Dodenburg and Schwarz summoned up enough strength to unscrew the guns' firing pins and smash them. Then they, too, slumped on the floor with the rest. Drained completely of energy, friend and foe crouched there in a heavy silence, broken only by their harsh breathing, heads bent as if in defeat.

***

And to the north, unseen by the handful of exhausted survivors who had made it possible, the first soldiers of General Reichenau's Sixth Army began to cross the Canal. At first a company, then a battalion, the men fearful that

the great guns they knew the Fort contained would open up on them when they were in mid-stream. But the cannon remained silent. A regiment followed. It became a division, then a corps. As far as the eye could see, the flat countryside was one great moving mass of field-grey. The great triumphant dash into France could begin.

Fort Eben Emael was in German hands.

CHAPTER 18

A strange sound woke them from their apathetic daze.

"What was that?" someone asked.

"It's a trumpet – an infantry trumpet," the Vulture said. He got slowly to his feet and stumbled past the Belgian prisoners to peer through the observer's aperture. "They're surrendering!" he breathed excitedly. "There are German troops down there and white flags, white flags everywhere. The Belgians have given up!"

Now they could hear thin cheers rising from below.

"Come on," Geier said, rolling down his sleeves to cover his thin arms and ordering his last wisps of hair. "There'll be photographers. They mustn't miss. SS Assault Battalion Wotan!"

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A heavy silence lay over the plateau, broken only by the awkward stumbling steps of the brown-clad Belgians coming out to surrender – hundreds of them, led by their bitter-faced defeated commander, Major Jottrand.

The smell of death and destruction lay everywhere. It was a curious smell, redolent of long-locked-up casements, cement dust, explosives and blood.

Von Dodenburg walked over to the Belgian prisoners who were already laying their dead in long files under the supervision of a young German infantryman, his field-grey uniform neat and unstained. He looked at the bodies. They had fought well, but they had had no real purpose: no will to conquer, to be triumphant.

A country's greatness depended on the readiness of its people to sacrifice themselves for a cause, von Dodenburg thought, *but their comrades had not been prepared to do that because they had no real cause.* They had remained mechanics, farmers, shopkeepers in uniform and could not expect greatness. For in the final analysis all they wanted was to earn a nice comfortable living. *They had no dream.*

"Sir," it was Schulze. "We're ready."

Together they limped back to where the survivors of the company were

arranged in a rough double line. Von Dodenburg tugged at his helmet and squared his shoulders while Schulze moved back into the line. "Watch it," he snapped.

Their positions stiffened. "Company – company, attention!" he yelled, while the hundreds of field-greys crowded around the great fort stared in amazement.

As if they were back on the parade ground at the Adolf Hitler Barracks, the bloodstained, exhausted young giants snapped to attention, their hands stiffly held down their sides, their bodies rigid, their eyes staring into the distance.

Lieutenant von Dodenburg whirled round and marched stiffly towards where Captain Geier was waiting for him, his skinny little body erect. At the top of his voice he made his report. "Second Company, SS Assault Battalion Wotan present! One hundred and sixty-four casualties! Twenty men on parade, sir!"

In the momentary silence while Geier mustered the filthy blood-stained young officer in his ragged uniform, an unknown voice among the crowd of Wehrmacht soldiers said in a mixture of contempt and admiration, "Can you beat it? Having a shitty parade in the middle of a battle. Ain't that typical of the SS!"

In his cavalry officer fashion, the Vulture touched his cane, which Schulze had been sent to retrieve, to his smoke-blackened helmet. "Thank you, von Dodenburg. Please tell the men, 'thank you' and then march them off."

Von Dodenburg saluted, swung round and said formally, "The CO wishes to thank you." Without a pause, he raised his voice and ordered "Right turn."

As one they stamped round. Von Dodenburg stared at them in admiration. Where in the world would one find troops like them – veterans already, men with an unquenchable desire to fight and win?

"Second Company – march!"

With Geier and von Dodenburg at their head, the survivors swung down the hill towards the village of Canne, past the truck which 6th Army had sent to pick them up. The driver pushed back his helmet and shook his head in wonder.

"A song," von Dodenburg yelled. "One – two!" And they burst into that song which would soon make the whole of the Old Continent shiver in

anticipation and fear:

> Clear the streets, the SS marches
> The storm-columns stand at the ready.
> They will take the road
> From tyranny to freedom.
> So we are ready to give our all
> As did our fathers before us.
> let death be our battle companion
> We are the Black Band...

Then they were gone.

AFTERMATH

"My poor brave soldiers!"

Adolf Hitler to Major Geier. 21 June, 1940.

May, 1940, flew by in one great glorious dream, punctuated by the dressing of their wounds and painful probings carried out by respectful doctors, who were supervised by a team of specialists sent from the Berlin *La Charité* Hospital by Reichsführer Himmler himself. Every morning the newspaper of the SS, *Das Schwarze Korps*, bore huge banner headlines, underlined in red, screaming the news of victory after victory. It seemed to von Dodenburg, impatiently waiting for his wound to heal, that the brassy blare of trumpets on the radio, heralding yet another special announcement and another great triumph in the West, never ceased. In the bitter years to come, he would always remember that May as the happiest month of his whole life.

It was a happiness shared by the other survivors of the 2nd Company. A week after they had been delivered to the Cavalry Hospital in Heidelberg the Vulture had ordered champagne for every one. It must have cut a large hole in his pay for that month, but the little Company Commander insisted on celebrating. He had been promoted to the rank of major and been given command of the SS Assault Battalion.

The Butcher, too, took the opportunity offered by the promotion party to talk confidentially with the new Major. At first the Vulture denied his hesitant accusations hotly, but when the Butcher produced the photograph, his thin shoulders slumped a little in defeat and, looking up at Metzger, asked him what he wanted for his silence. "My old rank, sir, that's all."

"You realise you'll be the most hated man in the company – perhaps in the whole battalion? The survivors will know about you."

The Butcher nodded numbly. "I know that, sir. But I want my rank back."

The Vulture smiled cynically. "Of course, I realise how important that is to you – and you shall have it. Perhaps you can come and visit me in my quarters one of these evenings." Deliberately he ran his claw-like hand over the Butcher's big beefy paw.

The Butcher flushed hotly and drew his hand away quickly. Geier's cynical smile deepened. "We all have to pay for our little vanities and pleasures, my dear Metzger." But behind the mask of his face, his cold brain was racing. Metzger was a danger to his career; he must not be allowed to survive the next campaign. Somehow or other he must kill him and destroy

that damn fool photo of himself and Beppo, the Italian fisher boy, the one great love of his life.

***

Schulze occupied his time in hospital with more mundane matters. Once von Dodenburg visited him in his ward and remarked on the pencil marks on the wall behind his head. "They're the score marks," Schulze explained cheerfully.

"Score-marks?"

"Yes, sir. The nurses. When they come to dress my wound, they can't help but see my other broken bone, and being patriotic German girls they feel they have to sacrifice themselves for the cause. Two more to go and I've had the lot except that male nurse." Schulze gave a mock frown. "But I don't know about him. He's really not my type."

Von Dodenburg shook his head. "Haven't you got anything else in your head than that?"

"It's not in my head that I want it, sir," he replied easily. "That starts you thinking. And if you don't watch out, you're doing stuff to yourself. And as my old man used to say to me when I was a lad, that can lead to your teeth falling out and hair growing on your palms."

"God knows what the Führer would say if he realised that he had such veterans in the SS as you!"

***

Three weeks later the Master of all Europe from Poland to the English Channel found out. On 20 June, as the French began to lay down their arms, a full colonel arrived at the hospital, bearing personal orders from the Führer that they should attend him at the Forest of Compiègne near Paris, where he was due to sign the French surrender treaty.

Instantly the whole hospital was in an uproar. Uniforms had to be found and fitted. Wound medals and badges of rank had to be fixed on. A team of doctors was formed to accompany them in case anything went wrong with their wounds during the flight and the presentation; and the colonel from the Führer's Headquarters had to be kept at the hospital so that he could brief them on protocol. But finally they were ready to be driven out to the

Heidelberg military air strip for the flight to France, with Schulze hobbling to the staff car convoy at the very last moment, buttoning up his flies as he did so.

"What the devil kept you?" von Dodenburg snapped.

"I decided not to bother about the male nurse," Schulze replied happily. "But I did get the sister – in the broom cupboard!"

It was a beautiful warm June afternoon when they arrived at the Forest of Compiègne. The sun beat down on the ancient trees, which cast pleasant shadows on the glade where the sweating Wehrmacht engineers had finally positioned the old *wagon-lit* the tangible symbol of Germany's greatest defeat. In it the Kaiser's representatives had been forced to sign the armistice in 1918 under Marshal Foch's cold-blooded threats. The engineers had torn down the wall of the museum which had housed it and pushed it into the exact spot where the little Gallic cock of a Marshal had had his greatest triumph at 5am on that terrible 11 November.

Now it was the turn of the man who had been a humble corporal at that moment. Wounded and blinded in a Munich hospital, he had cried when he heard the news and had sworn an oath that he would avenge Germany's disgrace, if needs be, by force of arms. In exactly six weeks he had done what it had taken the Allies four years to do. France was beaten and the British had fled the Continent, taking with them only what they could carry.

At 3.15pm precisely, that same ex-corporal arrived in his big black Mercedes. With him were those men who had helped him to achieve his revenge. At the head of this brilliant cavalcade of high-ranking officers and party leaders, he strode into the glade, his step springy, his head raised in triumph.

Standing rigidly to attention just behind Geier, von Dodenburg saw how the Führer's attention was suddenly caught by the great granite block which the French had erected twenty-two years before to celebrate their victory. He stopped and then slowly walked up to it and read its infamous inscription, which von Dodenburg knew as if it had been branded on his heart by fire.

> HERE ON THE ELEVENTH OF NOVEMBER 1918
> SUCCUMBED THE CRIMINAL PRIDE OF THE GERMAN
> EMPIRE – VANQUISHED BY THE FREE PEOPLES WHICH
> IT TRIED TO ENSLAVE.

The young officer watched his Führer closely. Slowly Hitler stepped back a pace. He snapped his hands on his hips, arched his shoulders and planting his booted feet wide apart, he stared up at the granite block in a magnificent gesture of contempt.

Von Dodenburg felt at that moment that he could never betray Germany's man-of-destiny. He knew he must follow this man to the very end.

A plump man with receding hair, who had the look of a middle-weight boxer gone to seed, stepped close to the Führer and whispered something in his ear. It was Bormann, Hess's secretary, who took care of matters of protocol. Hitler listened and then nodded.

Turning, he advanced on the little group of SS men drawn up at the side of the glade.

Major Geier presented the company.

Hitler thanked him in a hoarse military manner. For one long moment he stared at their young faces. To von Dodenburg it seemed like an eternity. Then his dark eyes softened. They grew liquid and filled with genuine tears. "Only twenty left, Major Geier?" he asked in a broken voice.

"Yes, My Leader," Geier snapped.

The Führer shook his head to get rid of the tears. "My poor brave soldiers," he whispered, almost to himself. "Poor brave soldiers!"

He pulled himself together and, although time was short, insisted on shaking each one by the hand, looking up directly into their eyes with his own piercing gaze. Von Dodenburg could hardly repress the shudder of delight, pride, fear – a whole range of emotions, which he would never be able to express. All he knew was that that fleeting instant, when Adolf Hitler took his hand and stared into his face, made everything seem worthwhile.

The rest of the brief ceremony passed in a haze – the decorations, the words of praise, the Führer's flattering reference to "my SS, the elite of the nation", his promise of the "great days still to come". And then the great man was gone.

They caught one last glimpse of him, seated proudly in the chair that Foch himself had occupied in the wagon-lit in 1918, waiting for the French delegation to arrive.

Just as they had started to get into the cars which would take them back to Orly Field for the flight to Heidelberg, the French arrived. They looked beaten, humiliated and shabby, in spite of their fine powder-blue uniforms,

like representatives of a decadent civilization, which deserved to perish and knew it. Von Dodenburg gave them one quick glance, then turned his gaze away hastily. The French weren't pleasant to look at.

***

"Morning soldiers!" Major Geier yelled.

"Morning Major!" the new draft sang out the traditional reply.

Major Geier, mounted on the rostrum, slapped his cane against the side of his immaculately polished boots and said, "Soldiers, my name is Geier, which, I am told, aptly suits my appearance." He stroked his monstrous nose, as if to emphasize his point, just as he had done on that cold winter's morning when he had welcomed the January draft.

But if the cadre of his new 2nd Company remembered that morning, their faces did not show it – Schwarz, with the silver medal and the Iron Cross, first class, decorating his small chest, his dark eyes heavy and staring with incurable madness; Sergeant-Major Metzger, bearing his old rank to the complete astonishment of the survivors, a new cunning in his little red eyes; Schulze, a sergeant now, and the only 'other ranker' in the whole Battalion to have been decorated with the Iron Cross, first class, for his courage in the middle of the minefield; and a handful more of the survivors of the 2nd Company, who had been fit enough to return to full duty.

"At present, as you can see," the Vulture was saying to the attentive draft, "my rank is that of a lowly major. But my father was a general and before this war is over, I promise you I shall be General Geier too." He pointed his cane at them. "And do you know how I shall do it?"

Von Dodenburg turned his attention to the new draft. Their eager young faces were as yet unblemished by the marks of war. They were green – very green. But they were the best material Germany could offer in this autumn of the tremendous year of victory, 1940, every man a volunteer.

Nor were they drawn solely from the Reich this time. Among their ranks were youths from neutral Sweden and Switzerland, as well as from those countries, which up to recently had been Germany's bitter enemies – Flemings from rural Belgium, slim blonds from Norway and Denmark, sturdy Dutch farmers' sons. For von Dodenburg they were the tangible symbols of the New Europe: the youthful standard-bearers of a new era in the Continent's long history. As his eyes travelled along their ranks, he imagined

them as a new kind of Imperial Guard, not dedicated to the service of one country as Napoleon's had been, but to that of the Germanic New Order which would rejuvenate the weary, decadent old Continent, give it new energy, new blood, new purpose so that once again it would take its rightful place as the arbiter of the world's fate. This was the morning of a new era. Young Europe was on the march and nothing could stop them!

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Up on the rostrum, the Vulture toyed with his new Knight's Cross, the first to be awarded in the whole of the Division. "Soldiers," he rasped, "I do not ask you to love me. I do not ask you to respect me. All I ask from you is that you obey my orders with unquestioning obedience." His eyes swept their ranks. "And God help any one of you, soldier, NCO or officer who fails to do exactly that." His voice rose harshly. "Soldiers, I welcome you to SS Assault Battalion Wotan!"

– THE END –

CLAWS OF STEEL

DOGS OF WAR – VOLUME FOUR

by Leo Kessler

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"When the order is given, you will drive forward with the greatest tank armies ever assembled in the history of warfare... crushing the life out of the Soviet serpent with two huge claws of steel."

Adolf Hitler to his generals. May, 1943.

BOOK 1 – THE GREAT PLAN

"The whole of Germany's tired. Heaven, arse and twine, we're fighting half the world after all! And that's exactly why we must be hard. The German soldier has to be so hard that he is the match for any two Tommies, Amis or Ivans – and the SS man has to be twice as hard as the ordinary Wehrmacht stubble-hopper!"

Major Geier, CO SS Assault Battalion WOTAN to Capt. von Dodenburg, June 1943.

CHAPTER 1

The Mercedes swung out of the Mauer Forest on to the road to Rastenburg. Immediately it picked up speed. On either side the spring gale was ripping at the branches of the ancient beeches and whipping up the surface of Lake Mauer into white caps.

But the high ranking officers in the Mercedes, the sombre field-grey of their uniforms relieved only by the crimson stripe of the staff down the sides of their trousers, had no eyes for the East Prussian scenery this spring day. The situation at the Russian Front was too serious. Stalingrad had fallen and a quarter of a million German soldiers had shambled off into the Russian cages. Now they knew the Führer must make the right decision, because if he didn't soon, the whole Eastern Front could well break under the tremendous weight the Red Army was bringing to bear on it.

Colonel-General Model's car stopped at Gate 1 to Special Area 1 of the 'Wolf's Lair'. The SS guards saluted rigidly. But even though the red-faced General with the monocle squeezed into his right eye was well known at the HQ, they insisted on seeing his identity card. With a muffled curse he passed it over to the massive Lieutenant in charge of the guard and stared straight ahead at the sombre headquarters hidden in the East Prussian Forest. What had General Jodl once called the place? Half monastery and half concentration camp? *It damned well looked like it.*

Satisfied with his ID card, the massive SS officer clicked to attention once again and ordered the guard to lift the red-and-white striped pole. Colonel-General Model could pass through. One by one the grey camouflaged Mercedes followed. Drop a bomb on this road now, Model thought sourly as the convoy formed up again, and that would be the end of the German Army. For all its key leaders were present in the convoy – Manstein, Guderian, Hoth – summoned from all over the vast Eastern Front to hear what the former Corporal in the Bavarian Infantry had planned for them.

But there was little chance of an enemy bomb hitting Adolf Hitler's HQ, Model told himself, even if the Tommies had possessed a bomber capable of flying so far. The low concrete huts, their flat roofs turned into gardens, were perfectly hidden in the tall beeches. They'd be impossible to

see from the air. And as for a land-based attack, the Wolf's Lair was hermetically sealed off from the outer world by layer after layer of minefields and roadblocks, defended by the elite of the 'Bodyguard Division'. Whatever else they said about the Führer, Model concluded, he was no fool when it came to looking after his own safety. The Ivans or the Tommies would need an army to break into this place.

A few moments later the convoy of high-ranking officers swung by the last barrier, inside which the Führer's own Alsatian bitch Blondi ran around freely, ready to go for the genitals of any unauthorised person, and halted outside the Leader's own hut in which today's vital conference was to be held.

Jodl, Hitler's pale-faced clever Chief-of-Staff, received them at the door and ushered them into the map room, where the top secret maps were already laid out on the big oak table.

"You may be seated gentlemen," he said and indicated the high-legged wooden stools around the table. "Of course no smoking in the Führer's presence. Remember that Guderian."

He looked at Colonel-General Guderian, the father of the *Blitzkrieg*, and the others laughed politely, for they knew the hot-tempered panzer leader liked his cheap ten pfennig cigars.

"You may help yourself to soft drinks." He indicated the bottles on the table. "For those of you who are so inclined, the Führer's barley water is over there. But there'll be nothing strong, I'm afraid, until after the conference. However you can–"

"Jodl," Model interrupted him in irritation, "we've heard all this before. Before the Führer comes, brief us quickly. Heaven, arse and twine, Jodl, you know we don't want to be caught with our breeches down when he starts asking those awkward damned questions of his!"

Jodl's pale cunning eyes gleamed with unusual animation for him. "I can tell you this, Model. You and Hoth, and naturally you too, Field Marshall," he bowed his head politely in Manstein's direction, "Will be getting the biggest job of your whole careers. What the Führer is going to propose to you will be the most tremendous–"

"Gentlemen," Field Marshall Keitel's harsh Prussian voice broke in to the discussion. "the Führer!"

They stiffened to attention immediately like a bunch of young recruits meeting their drill sergeant for the first time. Keitel, as wooden-faced and impassively stupid as ever, had flung open the door to admit Adolf Hitler. He

flashed a quick look at them and then barked, "Heil Hitler!"

"Heil Hitler!" The handful of men, who had commanded Germany's military destiny for the last three years, flung up their right arms in the Roman salute.

Dramatically Adolf Hitler stood there and gave each one of them a long searching look with those hypnotic eyes of his, peering into their hard soldiers' faces, as if he hoped to see something there, known only to himself. Manstein, clever and cynical, and probably half-Jewish for all he knew; Guderian, awkward but brilliant, a general he'd already sacked once, whom he could not do without; Model, gross, a heavy drinker, but a lion in defence; and Hoth, grey-haired and quiet, but so good that he was going to entrust him with the greatest tank army ever assembled in the history of battle. Finally he broke off his scrutiny of their faces.

"Gentlemen," he said quietly, "you may be seated."

He gave them a few moments to settle themselves on the hard wooden stools, then got down to business at once.

"Gentlemen, I know what some of you are thinking. We have suffered a severe setback at Stalingrad, I must admit that. Some of you think therefore, that we should go over to the defensive."

He looked at them challengingly, as if he expected them to agree, but even Guderian managed to keep his mouth shut and fix his angry eyes on the maps in front of him.

"But we will not go over to the defensive. That would be playing into the Bolsheviks' hands, and I am not going to play any game prescribed for me by that Yiddish clique which rules Soviet Russia. No." He paused and thrust out his jaw aggressively, as if he were giving one of his great dramatic speeches at the annual Nuremberg Party Rally. "Gentlemen, I am proud to announce to you that National Socialist Germany will not just be content to hold what it has conquered in these last eighteen months in Russia. National Socialist Germany will go over to the attack." He brought his clenched fist down on the table hard. "In three months' time, gentlemen, by the first of July 1943 at the latest, your armies will march east once again – and they will march to victory, final victory!"

Even their rigid military training could not prevent them gasping with surprise. Manstein's habitual slightly bored look vanished from his long face, as if it had been wiped off by an invisible hand.

Hitler smiled slightly, pleased with the effect his words had had. Then

his face grew hard again. "Gentlemen, this summer two great German armies will go over to the offensive – an offensive of decisive importance. One which must end in swift and final success. Those armies will be given the best formations, the best weapons, the best ammunition National Socialist Germany can provide – and that means the best in the world." His dark eyes blazed with some inner fire. "Victory at Kursk will be a beacon for the whole world!"

Kursk, Model breathed to himself. *So that was it!*

Hitler paused for breath before indicating they should come and look at the centre map. There was a hasty scraping of stools as they followed his command.

"You can see, gentlemen, that the Bolsheviks had cut a huge bulge into our front here around Kursk. That bulge presents a tremendous danger to our whole Eastern Front. It is from there that they will undoubtedly launch their own summer offensive which could well split our forces."

The generals, bent over the big map, nodded their heads in agreement. Although they'd disagreed with the former corporal about strategy often enough in the past, they knew he was completely right about the overwhelming danger presented by the Kursk salient.

"If we can attack first, gentlemen," Hitler continued, "not only will we be able to cripple the Bolsheviks' offensive power and protect our own front, but we shall be able to crash right into their rear. After Stalingrad they will not be expecting us to take the offensive, believe you me, I feel it in my bones. We shall take them off their guard."

"But my Führer," Model said, before anyone else could protest, "where are we to get the men?"

Hitler looked at the be-monocled general triumphantly. "I expected you to ask that question, Model." He turned to Jodl, his chief-of-staff. "Jodl perhaps you would be good enough to detail our resources in case there are others present who doubt our ability to carry out the new offensive."

Model flushed a deep red but did not say anything, as all attention turned to Jodl.

Jodl was in his element. He had never been happy at the front; his greatest love was the staff, where the human element was reduced to a series of numbers or a red line on a graph. "Gentlemen, since Stalingrad we have built up the greatest force assembled ever by the Wehrmacht. In the first line of attack we will have fifty divisions, sixteen of them panzer or motorised.

Those divisions will contain nine hundred thousand men with ten thousand guns and three thousand tanks. They will be supported by 2,000 aircraft and a further twenty divisions in reserve, composed of–" Without a single glance at the notes held in his slim, well-manicured fingers, he rattled off statistic after statistic, while his fellow general officers listened to his exposé with ever-increasing awe. "In short, gentlemen," he concluded his brilliant summary of the forces available for the attack, "the workers and civilian authorities of National Socialist Germany are putting the most powerful weapon known to the world in your hands, knowing that the Greater General Staff of the German Reich will not fail them in its use."

He stopped and let the veiled threat sink in, but they overheard the threat; they were too bemused by the tremendous number of men and weapons that Hitler seemed to have conjured up from nowhere for this great new surprise summer offensive.

"My God, Jodl," Model breathed, the monocle popping out of his right eye, the Führer's presence completely forgotten with the shock of it all, "where in the devil's name did you get such numbers from?"

"I can tell you, Colonel-General!" Hitler said, exuberantly. "From the sacrifice and will to victory of our German folk-comrades, our own citizens. They are prepared to toil for eighteen hours a day on pitiful rations, subjected as they are to the terror raids of those Anglo-American air gangsters – and send their seventeen-year-old sons to war too – so that the Greater German Reich may achieve its great victory." Hitler's voice rose, the lock of unruly black hair fell over his forehead and little flecks of foam had collected at the sides of his mouth. "For you, the Battle of Stalingrad was a defeat. But for me it was a kind of victory. Yes, a victory!"

He looked at them challengingly. "For Stalingrad rallied this nation. Just as Dunkirk put the decadent English behind that drunken Jewish sot Churchill, Stalingrad has placed Germany behind me. Now the German Folk know it is march or croak as we used to say in the infantry in the old war. Now it is prepared to devote its very last bit of energy – its very life blood – into this fight for survival. My folk comrades know what victory at Kursk must mean for National Socialist Germany."

He struck his padded chest almost angrily, his guttural Austrian voice rising even more hysterically, as he cried to his awed generals: "Our armour will be concentrated in two great armies on either side of the salient. You, Model, will get the Ninth Army in the north. You, Hoth, the Fourth Panzer

Army in the south. And know this, Hoth, I'm entrusting you with my elite, my SS panzer divisions." His eyes bored into those of the white-haired tank commander.

"I'm very appreciative of the honour, my Führer," Hoth stammered hastily. "I am sure that I shall–"

His words faltered into nothing. Hitler was not listening. His hands held wide apart, he roared at them. "When the order is given, you, Model, and you, Hoth, will drive forward with the greatest tank armies ever assembled in the history of warfare. You will take the Bolsheviks by complete surprise, smashing into them with your armour," he brought his hands together abruptly, "crushing the life out of the Soviet serpent with... with," almost desperately he sought for the right words, "with two huge claws of steel!"

CHAPTER 2

Sergeant Schulze of the SS Battalion Wotan gave one of his celebrated farts. It was long-drawn out, and not unmusical. But the other NCOs of the First Company, stretched out in the long grass around him listening to Captain von Dodenburg's lecture on the new Tiger tank, were obviously feeling as lazy as he was. They contented themselves with a polite titter at the burly Hamburger's attempts to amuse them on this hot June day.

The First Company's comedian was not offended. As he sat there with the flies buzzing around lazily in the hat, he felt happy with the world. The Battalion had not been in action for three months now; County Leader Schmeer's wife Waltraut cooked the best Schnitzel in the whole of Westphalia – though unfortunately she demanded a bit of meat from him in return; and her maid Heidi had the biggest pair of lungs it had ever been his good fortune to fondle – and he'd fondled plenty of big knockers in his twenty-seven years. He yawned mightily and tried to concentrate on the Company Commander's lecture about the Tiger.

"Those of you who were fortunate to serve with the Battalion in Russia," he nodded to Sergeant Metzger, the Battalion's senior NCO, seated next to him, "will remember that our Mark IVs armed with the short 75mm was not much of a match for the Popov's T-34 Tank. The shells bounced off the damned thing's glacis plate like golf balls." Von Dodenburg wiped the sweat off his bronzed face and frowned at the memory. "But it's going to be different with this baby." He tapped the sectional drawing of the Tiger pinned on the blackboard behind him. "The Mark VI's 88 is the best gun in the world and the Tiger will carry enough ammo to see off a whole Popov tank brigade – 92 rounds of 88 and 5,700 for the two MGs. Here in the turret co-axial of course – and down here next to the driver."

He paused and pushing back his cap with its death's head insignia to reveal hair bleached to tow by the sun. "In due course, you'll all be able to see for yourselves when the factories start delivery. For the time being, however, do you know what–"

"I do, sir," Schulze interrupted him, knowing that his special position in the Battalion as its comedian and only non-commissioned holder of the Knight's Cross enabled him to take liberties. "I know what I'd like to do, sir –

sink a nice foaming litre of beer! My mouth feels like the third-class waiting room at Hamburg Main Station!" He licked his dry lips mightily to emphasise his thirst and looked cheekily at von Dodenburg.

"Typical Schulze," he said without rancour. "Always thinking of his creature comforts. You're getting soft up here in Westphalia. Too much beer and too much Schnitzel. God knows what'll happen when we have to fight the Ivans again."

"The way I feel now, sir," Schulze replied, "I'll just open my trap and breathe on 'em. I'm so dry and my breath's so hot, that it'll shrivel the Popovs up like a flame-thrower!"

Sergeant Metzger looked at the other NCO angrily. "Just because he's got the crappy throatache, he thinks he can get away with murder," he mumbled.

Von Dodenburg ignored him. He looked around the sweating red-faced NCOs sitting in the parched grass and then said, "All right, you heroes. That'll be enough for today."

Hastily Metzger sprang to his feet. Despite the June heat, he was dressed as if he were about to go on the Führer's Birthday Parade, his burly chest covered in decorations. He even had his 'monkey's swing' – the sharpshooter lanyard – dangling from his shoulder.

"Group – group attention!" he bellowed, as if they were a thousand metres away and not ten. He swung the officer a tremendous salute. "Permission to dismiss, sir?" he barked.

Casually Captain von Dodenburg touched his hand to his cap. "Granted, Metzger. Dismiss the men."

Slowly von Dodenburg and Schulze walked back towards their billets, situated in the shadow of Paderborn's ancient Gothic cathedral, while the younger NCOs followed them at a respectful distance, not wishing to infringe on the conversation of these two men who had been fighting together since 1939.

"What do you make of it then, sir?" Schulze asked, when he was sure that none of the others were listening.

"Make of what, you rogue?"

"The new tank and everything."

Captain von Dodenburg shrugged. "We're getting a new tank, that's all Schulze."

"Come on, sir," Schulze persisted. "Anybody with all his cups in his

cupboard knows we're the Hirer's fire-brigade. Wherever there's a blaze, off we go to put it out."

"You're right – as always, Schulze."

Schulze ignored the irony and waited.

"But if you took time to read the papers instead of feeding your face at County Leader Schmeer's – and undoubtedly doing other disreputable things which I don't want to know about – you would know that there is no blaze at the moment, especially on the Eastern Front. Marshal Mud's taken over from Marshal Winter. Not a damned thing is moving at the front at the moment."

"Then when are we going to start the blaze?" Schulze persisted.

"Why the urgency, Schulze? I am surprised at you. I didn't realise you'd become a glory-hunter," von Dodenburg joked.

"Me a glory-hunter," the Hamburger said dourly. "I've had a noseful – right up to here." He drew a line under his big nose with his forefinger. "But you take it from me, sir. Time is running out. I spent my last leave in Hamburg and there wasn't much of Barmbek where my old man lives left. The Tommies are knocking the shit out of the place and they're keeping it up in spite of what those glamour boys of the Luftwaffe can–"

"The Führer knows all about that. He'll fix the shitty Tommies, believe you me." It was Metzger, who had caught up with them, the secret sectional plan of the new tank clasped importantly under his arm.

Captain von Dodenburg, his face suddenly serious at Schulze's mention of the hammering his hometown was taking, nodded. "Yes, Metzger, you're right," he said slowly. "We can always rely on the Führer."

Schulze said nothing as they began to march across the cobbled Cathedral square, he caught the look of uncertainty on the Captain's face. "Yeah mate," he told himself grimly, "yer growing up at last, aren't yer. Yer learning that those crappy Tommies and Amis have got us by the short, black and curlies, Captain von Dodenburg."

***

Captain von Dodenburg walked slowly and thoughtfully towards the evacuated school which had been turned into the Officers' Casino when they had moved into the provincial Catholic town three months before. It was pleasant now in the shade of the twin towers and the bells were ringing melodiously, but he could not quite shake off the mood engendered by

Schulze's remark just before they had parted.

He was right, of course. The Homeland was hard pressed by the enemy air gangsters. His own Berlin had suffered badly over these last months and his aged father, the General, had been forced to retire, much against his will, to his country estate in East Prussia, where he had set about raising a local defence immediately "in case the Popovs come". Though there was very little possibility of that. But it wasn't the bombing that worried von Dodenburg. It was the mood of the Homeland. It had changed considerably since the Battalion had marched off so proudly to attack Russia two summers before.

There was something desperate, hectic about it, with the civilians grabbing wildly for their pathetic pleasures, as if death were waiting for them round the very next corner.

He thought suddenly of the woman he had met at a party during his leave in Berlin. At first in her dark, sober clothes, which (though it was forbidden to wear black) indicated she was a war widow. she had seemed like so many German women, living only for the final victory. But after the drink had begun to flow, he had felt an exploratory hand crawl spiderlike up his leg. Twice he pushed it away, thinking that the woman was perhaps unused to drink. But when she began boldly to attempt to undo his flies while the others sang and danced all around them, he knew that he was faced with a determined and experienced woman, eager to have her pleasure. Half an hour later, he was back in her flat, lying naked on the matrimonial bed while she attempted drunkenly to pull off her pants. Sometime, during the night she had giggled:

"First one killed in Poland in 39 – Iron Cross Second Class. Second blown to bits in the Ruhr – War Service Cross First Class. Everything getting bigger and better – whoops, just like this delightful decoration in my hand, eh!"

And the unknown war widow had not been the only one in the two weeks' leave he had spent in Berlin. But it wasn't only the women; it was the black marketeers, the profiteers, the base stallions, hanging on to their safe rear echelon jobs, turning pale at the mere mention of the 'Eastern Front'.

"Hello, Captain von Dodenburg," a girlish voice broke into his reverie, "how are you today?"

He turned, startled. It was Karin Schmeer, the only daughter of the local County Leader, staring across at him in her black and white uniform of the German Maidens – the female equivalent of the Hitler Youth. She had

eager, bright blue shining eyes, and despite the briefcase full of schoolbooks she was carrying, there were none of the half-promises of the usual schoolgirl about her body. She was tall and well-developed, with good brown muscular legs and full breasts, which threatened to burst out of the thin material of her white silk blouse at any moment.

"Oh, it's you, Karin," he commented unnecessarily. "On your way back from school?"

"No. We got out at one. I've been to a meeting of the Maidens. We had a talk by that Lesbian – the Area Leader – contraception and the German Woman." She sniffed prettily. "Not that she'd know anything about that, would she?"

Von Dodenburg shook his head. "Where did you hear such talk, Karin, at your age?"

"I'm nearly sixteen. In India I would be a mother now – twice over," she said firmly and thrust out her big breasts. "You'd be surprised at what I know, Captain von Dodenburg." Momentarily she lowered her long eyelashes and looked up at him through them in what she probably thought was a seductive manner.

Captain von Dodenburg laughed shortly in spite of his mood. "I'm sure I would, Karin." He touched his hand casually to the brim of his cap. "My regards to your father, the County Leader."

She curtsied gracefully, giving him a quick glimpse of the dark cave of her ample breasts; then she was on her way, swinging her hips from side to side provocatively in a very un-Maidenly manner.

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The Commanding Officer of the Wotan Battalion was sitting on a cavalry saddle in the centre of the Casino, swinging his immaculately booted legs angrily and slapping his riding cane against the right one at regular intervals, as von Dodenburg walked in.

"Ah, it's you, von Dodenburg," he rasped in his unmistakably Prussian voice and screwed his monocle more firmly in his eye above the monstrous beak of a nose which had given him his nickname of 'The Vulture'. "Will you just look at this?"

"What, sir?"

"This." With the grace of the regular cavalry officer as he had once

been, before he had joined Himmler's Armed SS in order to gain more rapid promotion he swung his leg over the saddle and walked over to von Dodenburg. "This report from that damn fool of a young spurter who became Lieutenant Schwarz's second-in-command in the Second Company last month. Not only did the craphead take his men to visit the damned cultural anthropological museum in Berlin – without my permission, mark you – but he also had the audacity to send me a full report on the visit!" He slapped the paper with his cane in irritation. "All about the difference between Jewish and Aryan tibias and similar tommyrot. For all I know they spent their time there in Berlin measuring the length of Yiddish foreskins or some other idiotic rubbish–" he broke off, beside himself with rage.

Captain von Dodenburg bit back his smile just in time. "Orders from the Reichsführer," he snapped in his best military fashion, "the troops are to be instructed in the basic details of Germanic racial superiority."

"Racial superiority," the Vulture spluttered. "What the devil does Himmler think we're running here – a school for students still wet behind the spoons – or a military establishment, training soldiers to dodge bullets which make no distinction between a man whose got a damned foreskin a metre long or has had it docked off by some Yid priest armed with a blunt razor blade, eh?"

Captain von Dodenburg thought it wiser to remain silent. The Vulture was unpredictable when he was angry; which was always when the reputation or efficiency of his beloved Wotan was threatened.

The Vulture slapped his cane hard against his boot and strode towards the big French window. He swung round abruptly and levelled the cane at the other officer.

"It all fits in, von Dodenburg. The Battalion's getting soft. No lice, no hunger, no Popovs shooting at them – and the men go to pieces. Last year at this time they were grubbing in the trenches like a lot of cur dogs for what they could find, and there were some of them who were substituting other kinds of meat for the Old Man ration stuff we got." He looked at von Dodenburg darkly.

The younger officer knew what the CO meant. Last winter when they had been starving in the miserable Kuban marches, there had been three reported cases of cannibalism in the Division when supplies had failed to come up, and Schulze had joked grimly they'd put a couple of kitchen bulls in the 'giddiup soup' now that the horses were running out.

"They're getting soft, von Dodenburg, and I'm not going to have it. By the time this war is over I am going to be a general like my father was before, and those greenbeaks out there are going to get me those stars, whether they like it or not."

"They're tired, sir," he said gently.

"Of course they are," the Vulture snapped. "The whole of Germany's tired. God almighty, we're fighting half the world after all." He pointed his riding cane at von Dodenburg almost accusingly. "And that's exactly why we must be hard. The German soldier has to be so hard that he is the match for any two Tommies, Amis or Ivans – and the SS man has to be twice as hard as the ordinary Wehrmacht stubble-hopper. We're the nation's elite, aren't we?" He twisted his ugly face into a cynical grin, and von Dodenburg guessed what he was thinking.

The Armed SS was only a convenient means for him to mount more rapidly up the ladder of promotion; he had no feeling for the sacredness of the National Socialist cause. As Major Geier often boasted in the Casino: "Never voted in an election in my life; never read anything since I left school save army reports; and I'm not interested in a thing except those damned general's stars!"

"Do you think then that we'll be sent to the front again soon, sir?" von Dodenburg asked a little hesitantly, not wanting to bring another Geier tirade down upon himself.

"Yes. I got the alert notice from Division this morning. We're on alert stage three."

"For where?"

The Vulture shrugged. "I don't know, but I can guess. Eastwards – the bloody Popovs again." He walked thoughtfully back from the window, his head bent. "But the men aren't ready for that yet, von Dodenburg. They are not the same men we took to Russia with us the first time. They've not got the same spirit." Suddenly he looked up and stared at von Dodenburg challengingly. "But by God, I'm going to give them that same spirit, even if I have to beat it into their hides!" He brought his cane down with a whack on the nearest table. "Great crap on the Christmas tree, von Dodenburg, when this Battalion marches eastwards again, it's going to be the finest unit in the Army. Now listen, this is what I plan to do when the Tigers arrive..."

CHAPTER 3

There were others among the veterans of SS Assault Battalion Wotan who, like the Vulture and Captain von Dodenburg, were dissatisfied with the state of the Reich. Sergeant Metzger was one. For Lore, his blonde, voluptuous wife, had not received him in the manner he had expected after a year's absence in Russia. On the long three day train trip back to Germany, he had boasted to his cronies of the NCO Corps:

"The second thing I'll do is take my pack off and then I'll tell her she'd better have a good shitty look at the floor because she'll only be seeing the ceiling for the next couple of weeks. Christ, I'm so randy, I can't get up without knocking the mess tins off the table!"

But it hadn't turned out that way. Lore had been obedient enough and they spent his first forty hours in the rented flat's big old-fashioned brass bed with Jesus and his Apostles looking down at their sweaty cavorting with saintly, disapproving eyes. Yet somehow she lacked the fiery passion he would have expected from a woman who hadn't had a link slipped to her for twelve months or more, and once when he had reached under the bed for a fresh Parisian and another swig of the good Westphalian beer from the crate he kept there, he had actually caught her yawning, as if with boredom at the whole business.

"There I was," as he remarked, more than once, to his cronies in the Ratskeller cellar bar to which he repaired every afternoon after training, "pushing my meat into her, the juice pouring off me and my arse going like a Jewish fiddler's elbow – and she was yawning, as if all I was doing was scratching her flaming back!"

Sergeant Metzger was not a very intelligent man. Indeed the "Butcher", as he liked to call himself, was generally regarded as a dumb horned ox by his comrades of the NCO Corps; but all the same a certain unpleasant suspicion was beginning to grow slowly but surely in his thick, muddled head that all was not well with his blonde, plump Lore. As he told his cronies at the Ratskeller skat-table in a moment of drunken confidence a couple of weeks after they had returned from Russia.

"There's something shitting well wrong there, lads. A big healthy woman like that should be wanting it every night, shouldn't she, especially as

she's been so long without a bit. But if I find out that there's been somebody else up her drawers, I'll... I'll..." He left his threat unuttered, but the quick gesture of his trained butcher's hand, as if he were cutting off something lying very low on the male anatomy, left his red-faced, drunken fellow NCOs in no doubt as to what would happen to the unfortunate man in question, if the Butcher ever caught him.

A couple of times Sergeant Metzger had sneaked home at midday, but he had found Lore alone, pottering around the dusty flat in sleepy boredom. Once he had dropped off the Volkswagen jeep, which came to pick him up every morning, as it had gone round the first corner, doubled back and spent the next couple of hours watching their flat from Hackenschmidt's cigar store across the road. But no one suspicious had entered.

In the end he had been forced to bribe the little sixteen year old Macaroni Mario – all gleaming black greasy hair and shining white teeth – who looked after the apartment house while his parents, both 'volunteer workers' in Paderborn's war factories, were out at work, to keep an eye on Lore and report to him if any men went up to her place.

But although the little spaghetti-eater carried out his task with surprising loyalty and thoroughness, he had nothing to report, save for once when one of the younger chaplains from the cathedral had come to call in the mistaken belief that Lore was still Catholic.

"You know – a priest," he had exclaimed excitedly at the bottom of the dark stairs that night when Metzger had come staggering in from the Ratskeller. "They are all for this, signor." He made a crude gesture of thrusting his dirty forefinger through a circle made by the thumb and forefinger of the other hand. "They no have girls. Always think this." He had made the obscene gesture once more, looking up at the big German, his dark liquid Italian eyes gleaming fervently.

But Metzger had pushed him roughly to one side. "No, you shitty spaghetti-eater," he had growled, "those blacks don't even know what's for – and even if they did, it'd be the five-fingered widow for them in case they went to hell for doing the other." And with that he had staggered on upstairs.

But in the same week that the first of the new Tigers had started arriving at the Sennelager railhead from the Stuttgart factories, Sergeant Metzger had, what seemed to him, the first real indication that his suspicions about Lore were justified. As usual Mario received him in the dark hallway and made his report.

"Nothing, signor," he said with an expressive shrug of his shoulders. "Nobody come."

Metzger pointed to his open flies. "You come perhaps," he said, mimicking the macaroni's broken German. "Been visiting the five-fingered widow, Mario, eh?"

The Italian boy coloured hotly and fumbled with his flies, as Metzger passed on his way up the stairs, a broad grin on his red, stupid face. But the grin vanished immediately as Lore called out – even before he had opened the door.

"And wipe those shitty boots of yours on the carpet before you come in! And none of your casual licks, either, do you hear?"

Metzger growled to himself and he gave the door that look which had made many a recruit "cream his drawers", as he was wont to boast to his drinking cronies; but he did as he was told before entering the little flat.

Lore, plump and blonde, and for some reason highly flushed, sprawled on the sofa in her black artificial silk slip in a manner which showed him she wasn't wearing her pants again – probably, he told himself, because of the heat.

"Well, did you wipe them?" she asked, not looking at him.

"Yes," he growled. "I rubbed both my shitty soles off."

"You don't need to shout – I'm not deaf." She swung her legs off the back of sofa very carelessly. He caught a glimpse of something very black and hairy against the plump white softness of her thighs.

"Must you always sit around like that?" he snapped, pulling off his pistol belt with a sigh of relief.

"Like what?" she looked at him challengingly.

"Like a five mark whore in a Reeperbahn knocking shop," he answered, tugging at his collar. He poked a sausage-like finger at his tunic with its glittering decorations. "I'm a senior NCO in the Bodyguard you know, a man who has shed his blood for his Fatherland, for his Folk and Führer – I've got a position to live up to."

"The only position you can live up to is on yer belly," she answered contemptuously, "sticking yer meat in me. That's all you've got in your thick head."

"Be careful," he warned threateningly, half raising his hand. He would dearly have liked to have slapped her, but he fancied Lore after supper – and besides it was too hot to quarrel. So he contented himself with dropping into

a chair and thrusting out his right leg. "Dice-beakers," he ordered.

With a sigh, she straddled her legs over the boot, her plump backside towards him, the damp outline of her cheeks presented to his view in what, he considered was a very inviting manner. Momentarily he was tempted to let her have a good clap across the arse, but decided against the impulse. Instead he placed his left foot against her buttocks and pushed. With a grunt she pulled off the big boot and dropped it to the carpet.

"The next one," she said, "And don't stick your foot so far up my crotch. It hurts."

He considered letting her have the old Army retort that they wouldn't have found him up there if he hadn't been wearing his size eleven boots, but decided against it. "Perhaps next time then you'll wear your drawers if it hurts. What if Mario ever came in and saw yer like that just now on the sofa. You know what those shitty spaghetti-eaters are like – one sniff at it and they're walking round stiff-legged." He sniffed and considered for a moment. "Well, perhaps not Mario, he's a good lad and he's too young anyway. Too busy with his five against one, more than likely. But his father now, he's different–"

"You're disgusting," Lore said, and with a grunt tugged off the other boot. "All you ever think about is that." She turned round and stared down at him angrily, busily stuffing back one of her ample breasts which had escaped from the confines of her black slip. "God knows how you ever have time to carry out your duties, when all you've got in your big head is piggeries like that. Mario indeed!" She flung back her long blonde hair. "Why, he's barely sixteen."

Metzger pouted. "Well, when a man's been fighting for his country and away from it for over twelve months, he expects a bit more than–" He never finished his usual complaint, there was the noisy jangle of the flat's bell.

Metzger started up, "Who in heaven's name is calling at this time of the evening," he cried angrily. "What is this place – a fucking transit camp or–"

He broke off suddenly as the door swung open to reveal the pot-bellied, brown-shirted bulk of County Leader Schmeer himself, collecting box in his fat beringed hand, his sweating face puffed out like the fat backside of the Westphalian pigs he had bred before he become County Leader in 1933.

"Winter Help," he chortled cheerfully, rattling the box. "A few pfennigs for the lads at the front!" Then he saw Metzger. "Oh, it's you Metzger! Didn't know you were home."

Hastily Lore fled into the bedroom to find a gown while Schmeer's small red eyes followed the swing of her well-rounded buttocks greedily.

"Wouldn't like to have to buy that by the kilo, Metzger, eh?" he commented with a huge knowing wink. "Christ on a crutch, it's hot for June, isn't it!" Without waiting for an invitation to do so, he dropped into the nearest chair, its ancient springs squeaking in protest at the weight, and pulling out a large brown silk handkerchief wiped the sweat off his gleaming fat face. "I must have walked at least ten shitty kilometres, rattling this sodding box. Why all those healthy Hitler Youth lads can't do the collecting, I'll never know." He shrugged good humouredly. "But I suppose it's up to us Old Fighters to keep the banner flying, what?" He licked his lips significantly. "Makes you dry though!"

"Would you like a nice cool blond?" Lore said, coming into the room again, tying up her gown which did little to cover those tremendous breasts of hers.

"At my age?" Schmeer said, giving Metzger another of his knowing winks. "I'm a bit on the old side for that. Leave it to the young 'uns like Metzger, but I wouldn't mind a beer."

"Well, you heard the County Leader," Lore snapped to a bemused Metzger, who was still trying to recover from the surprise of having the area's most important Party Leader suddenly appear in their shabby rented flat.

"Of course... of course," he stuttered and headed for the kitchen.

"And a little Korn wouldn't do any harm, in spite of the heat," Schmeer called after him. "A man can't stand on one leg, you know."

When Metzger came back, he was just in time to see County Leader Schmeer take his big hand off Lore's plump knee. *The bastard*, he fumed to himself, nearly upsetting the glasses of gin he bore on the tray next to the beer.

Schmeer did not even bat an eyelid. He picked up a bottle of beer, without being asked, flipped open the snap top and raised it in salute to Lore. "To the ladies – bless 'em," he chortled. And then to the red-faced fuming Metzger. "To you comrade, the night's going to be cold!" He took a long draught of the ice-cold beer and belched contentedly. "Now that's what I call a cultivated glass of beer, Metzger." He gave a quick sip of his gin to follow it. "But that's what I expect at the household of Mrs. Sergeant Metzger, isn't it, dear." He pressed Lore's plump knee once more.

Metzger fought to control his temper. "How do you mean, County

Leader?"

"Well," Schmeer said expansively, "I always like to see that the wives of our folk-comrades doing their duty for Folk, Fatherland and Führer at the front are being looked after. You might say I'm like one of those blacks visiting his parishioners. Every week I did my round while you were in Russia, Metzger, and Mrs Sergeant here always had something waiting for me, didn't you, Lore."

"Yes, County Leader," Lore simpered, flattered by so much attention from such an important person.

"I'll give you – *always had something waiting for me*, you fat pig-breeding bastard!" Metzger cursed to himself. So that was it! It had been the County Leader after all. He'd been the one who had been slipping Lore the link while he had been slogging it out at the front risking his life for the Greater German Reich!

As he poured the fat County Leader yet another gin, a fake smile covering his broad stupid face, Sergeant Metzger swore undying hatred to the County Leader Adolf Schmeer.

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County Leader Schmeer was engrossed in slipping the money he had collected from the houses around the great Gothic cathedral into his pocket, when he almost bumped into Lieutenant Schwarz, CO of the Wotan's Second Company. Although it was nearly dark now and his head was not too clear after the gins he had drunk at Metzger's flat, he recognised the small SS officer at once.

"Schwarz," he cried joyfully and stuck out his hand. "Lieutenant Schwarz of the Bodyguard!"

Schwarz, his hand held protectively on his walking-out dagger, which had been presented to him personally by Reichsführer Himmler, looked at him with his crazy dark eyes, as if the fat Party official might well be some Ivan in disguise.

"Who are you?" he asked in a toneless voice. "How do you know my name?"

"Schwarz, the nephew of the late General Heydrich. All of us in the Party know about you, Lieutenant. We're not altogether the arsehole of the world here in Paderborn, you know." He smiled pleasurably, as he saw the

young SS officer relax his grip on his dagger. "The local head of the Gestapo Commissar Gerkin always keeps me informed of any distinguished Party member among our midst – among other things. Besides I knew your late uncle. He was down here in 1938 when we sorted them out. You remember the Crystal Night, don't you? While all those blacks over there in the Cathedral were wringing their hands and wetting their flannel knickers, we really gave the Yids a good working over."

Slowly Schwarz nodded his head, his face like a crazy death's head in the rays of the blood-red setting sun. He remembered the tremendous revenge the Party had taken on the Jews that night after it had been learned in Britain that the seventeen year old Jew Grynszpan had murdered a German consular official in Paris. Indeed he had taken part in the glorious massacre of Berlin's surviving Yids himself, although he had still worn the short black pants of a Hitler Youth Leader. What a tremendous night that had been – the crash of the stones through the synagogue's windows, the harsh stamp of their boots as they rushed inside and dragged out the screaming fat rabbi to lynch him from the lamp-post outside! It had been the turning point in his life – a great purifying experience – which had convinced him he must dedicate himself to the eradication of the Jews and the liquidation of the international Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy against National Socialist Germany.

But then after he had devoted himself one hundred per cent to that great cause for two years, his uncle – Heydrich – had confessed to him in a moment of drunken rage and self-hatred that his own grandmother was a Jewess, whose first name had been Sarah. What an overwhelming shock that terrible revelation had been! It had ruined his life. He, an SS officer and a member of the Führer's own elite division – the Bodyguard – with a Yid forefather, some greasy hook-nosed Issy, with lice-ridden dirty locks hanging down the side of his evil face–

He broke off his train of thought hurriedly, horrified yet once again at the knowledge that he was living a tremendous lie; for it was a thought that his cracked brain could not tolerate.

"Yes," Schmeer was chatting away merrily. "I remember how we got the old Rabbi out – big old fat Hirschbaum. We took his pants off and stood him in a barrel so that everyone could see his little docked Yiddish tail and made him sing the Horst Wessel Lied –"

He broke off suddenly and bowed to a black-coated elderly priest who was passing on his way to the Cathedral. "Good evening, your reverence," he

said, like some town grocer who knows that without the approval of the church, no local would buy his vegetables and he would be broke within the month. "Very pleasant weather, isn't it, your reverence?"

The elderly priest muttered something inaudible and passed on his way. When he was out of earshot, Schmeer wiped his big fist across his mouth and said apologetically, "We need those bastards for a while still, Lieutenant, but when the war's won, there'll be a reckoning with them, believe you me." His voice rose again. "I must be off, Schwarz, but I'd be honoured if the nephew of the late General Heydrich would care to come out with me one of these nights when my wife's busy with those ugly sows of the Belief and Beauty group." He nudged the silent Schwarz and leered at him. "Even in holy Paderborn, I think I can promise you a bit of something which will make your eyes pop... What about next Saturday night?"

Without waiting for the young officer to answer, he said heartily, "All right then, that's it. Let's make it next Saturday and you'd better eat your celery salad beforehand, Lieutenant Schwarz, if you know what I mean?"

He leered at Schwarz once more and then he was gone, leaving the crazy young SS officer alone in the centre of the darkening square, a taut little figure his fists clenched in an almost unbearable rage against the dirty trick fate had played him.

But Lieutenant Schwarz was not yet to sample the interesting sexual pleasures that the most catholic bishopric of Paderborn had to offer to the knowledgeable. For that Saturday marked the arrival of the Royal Air Force in the greatest strength it had ever flown in its thirty year history; Hamburg was burning and SS Assault Battalion was needed.

CHAPTER 4

Hamburg was dying. Rapidly, inexorably, it was being eaten up by the greedy, angry flames spreading from the thousands of phosphorous bombs. Even as the Wotan's trucks started to roll across the Elbe bridges they could smell the sweet stench of burning flesh. And before them the whole other bank was aflame. In the cab of the leading truck, his hand shielding his eyes against the orange glare, von Dodenburg could see the 18th Century house fronts swaying to and fro like pieces of blazing scenery on a stage. He squirmed round and shouted to Schulze in the back with the men:

"Tell 'em to put their gas masks on, Sergeant!"

"Sir," Schulze bellowed over the roar of the flames. "You heard what the officer said and as soon as we get out, piss on your handkerchiefs and wrap 'em round yer necks. And don't fucking well forget – or when yer shake yer heads, the turnips might well fall off!" But for once the humour was absent from his voice, as he watched his home town vanish before his horrified eyes.

Slowly the convoy of trucks worked its way through the burning streets, the sweat pouring off their drivers' faces as they fought the buildings collapsing on all sides. Twice they came to an abrupt, bone-jarring halt as five hundred pounders hit the earth just in front of the lead truck, exploding in a short thundering roar, followed by a long drawn-out hissing. A moment later the acrid blast swept over them and seemed to drag the air out of their lungs so that they were coughing and choking like old asthmatic men. Finally, however, they reached their destination, the forecourt of the main station, the burning houses on all sides, flooding the cobbled square with a yellowish, white-hot lake as their walls collapsed one after one.

"Everybody out," von Dodenburg yelled, crunching over the glass-littered cobbles, tripping neatly past the ever-spreading white-hot lake like a ballet dancer. "Come on, haul ass!"

Hastily the men jumped out of the company's trucks, knowing that if the vehicles remained motionless for more than a couple of minutes their gas tanks would start exploding. Shouting at the top of his voice against the greedy crackle of the flames and the steady crump of the 88mm flak located in a flak tower some two hundred metres away, von Dodenburg broke his

men into details.

A group of panic-stricken amputees in the blue-and-white striped smocks burst into their midst, hopping along on one leg or dragging those by the arms who had lost both legs. Von Dodenburg swallowed hard and fought back the horror which threatened to overcome him, as he saw that some of them were also blind, crawling along on their stumps, screaming for someone to come to their aid.

"Dehn," he yelled at the corporal standing behind Schulze. "For God's sake, man, get your detail and help those men into the station's shelter!"

"Sir!"

A woman ran through them screaming in agony, little flames burning on both her naked breasts where phosphorous had buried itself into her skin. Schulze dived for her, but missed. She ran on panic-stricken, the little flames streaming along behind her.

"Holy shit!" Schulze cursed. "Did you see that poor sow, Captain?"

Von Dodenburg nodded, tight-lipped. There was no hope for the woman unless she got herself in water up to her neck – phosphorous would continue burning as long as it was exposed to air – or a doctor managed to dig it out with a scalpel.

"Get a detail," he ordered thickly, fighting back the bile desperately. "Check they've got their rifles, Schulze. While the rest do the best they can in this mess, we'll have a go at trying to check the looters. You understand me, Schulze?"

"Yessir, you don't need to write it down." Schulze pulled back the flap of his pistol holster and checked that his Walther was ready for action; he knew what the CO meant. Hamburg swarmed with army deserters, black marketeers and foreign workers who made a business of looting immediately after the raids, coming out of their dirty holes like so many longtails searching alley trashcans for carrion.

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A few moments later they set off, marching carefully down the centre of the great avenue that led from the Alster to the station, with von Dodenburg, Schmeisser machine pistol cradled in his arm in the lead, and Schulze, Walther held in his ham-like fist, bringing up the rear.

They passed a city fire engine. Its motor was still running, but the

firemen had suffocated in the baking heat. Now they sat in their prescribed positions along both sides of the ladder, the clothes burnt off them, naked save for their boots and helmets.

"At the double!" von Dodenburg yelled.

Readily the file broke into a run, their heavy boots crunching over shattered slates and broken glass, not daring to glance at the dead men on the engine. A few seconds later the vehicle's gas tank exploded and the firemen disappeared in a vicious ball of ugly red and yellow flames.

They came closer to the city's pride – the internal lake called the Alster. In the ruddy glare of the burning buildings on the other side, they could see the phosphorous victims paddling about everywhere, desperately trying to keep their burnt bodies submerged. Weakening visibly by the effort, their cries for help seemed like an age-old prayer in which they no longer believed.

But the two elderly policemen piling up the victims from the burning hotel nearby had no time for them. A few were still alive, but most were charred by the searing flames and shrivelled up to the size of black pigmies, and the policemen stacked them as if they were logs of wood.

"Human child... oh, you holy human child!" Schulze suddenly gasped with horror, "Look at that!"

The patrol swung round. On the other side of the road, the line of trees which bordered it had been stripped bare of their leaves by the blasts; here and there a thick branch snapped off as if it had been a matchstick. But it was not the damage which had caused Schulze's horrified cry. It was the naked babies, blown among the branches from the nearby nursery, hanging there dead like over-ripe fruit.

Von Dodenburg swung his head back nauseated, choking back the bitter bile. He marched on, feeling he himself was a dead man among thousands of dead.

The 88s had stopped firing from the flak tower somewhere over by Dammtor station. To the north the first of the city's sirens started sounding the thin strains of the 'all clear'. The Tommies were going, their murderous assault on the city completed, leaving it now to its death throes. The soldiers marched by the burning *Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten* towards the *Jungfernstieg*, the port's great shopping centre.

"Keep your eyes peeled," von Dodenburg forced himself to order. "The rats will be coming out, now they're safe."

The pale-faced troopers gripped their weapons more firmly, their

shadows thrown into monstrous trembling relief by the flames. But the Jungfernstieg and its stores were a burning rain; and the civilians crowding it were not looters, but panic-stricken Hamburgers fleeing the dying city, wet rags wrapped round their faces, the steam rising from their dampened clothes. Everywhere burning bodies lay sprawled out in the gutters and a little white dog kept running in front of their feet, yelping crazily, as if it were seeking some dead master. Wordlessly Schulze raised his Walther and shot it neatly through the head. It sank down almost gratefully and died on the spot.

They plodded on through the refugees and the handful of city officials trying to organise them, without success. Once they stopped a figure running out of a burning house, a sack clutched in his hands. But the elderly man was not looting. He was the owner of the place who had risked his life to rush in and fetch out a bundle of Field Post letters from his son who had vanished at Stalingrad.

"But it's all I've got now, all I've got..." he kept repeating as they let him go to join the stream of refugees.

A little later they came across a white-haired old woman who could have been anyone's grandmother; save that she was completely naked and had a dead baby clutched to her ancient leathern dug, which had not given milk these fifty years, urging it to drink with the clucking noises nursing mothers make to encourage their infants. She would not move, nor would she answer their shouted questions and in the end they were forced to leave her, squatting on the curb, the dead child clutched to her skinny ancient body, as the sea of flame swept ever closer.

Five minutes later they were pressed into service to keep back a crowd of screaming frantic civilians while an officer in the combat engineers and a handful of men prepared to blow up an underground air raid shelter to make a fire break which might prevent the fire storm from spreading.

"But there are still women and children in there!" a hysterical middle-aged woman, her hair burned away to a military crop, kept screaming at the harassed young officer. "I know, I tell you! I just heard them shouting for help before you came... You must listen – there are children down there!"

But the young officer ignored her as he fumbled frantically with the detonator, and she relapsed into a heart-broken sobbing.

"If there were a God, He wouldn't allow this to happen – I know He wouldn't!" a woman next to her said angrily.

"Leave God out of this," an old man, who looked like a former NCO in

the old Imperial Army, snapped sharply. "God doesn't make war – men do!"

With a grunt the young engineer officer pressed the detonator plunger. There was a thick throaty muffled crump, a vicious stab of ugly yellow flame shot into the red air and what was left of the building above the underground air-raid shelter collapsed on top of it, sealing it off for good, leaving its occupants to die slowly from lack of oxygen.

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Grimly the soldiers plodded on, leaving behind them the sobbing women. It was just before they reached the main station once again that they bumped into the two elderly policemen leading seven RAF prisoners burdened with their parachutes and sweating heavily in their thick fur-lined flying overalls.

"Tommies?" von Dodenburg snapped in a strange voice, stopping the patrol.

The bigger of the two city policemen, his fat chest covered with World War One decorations, snapped to attention, his eyes warily taking in the SS runes. "Yes, Captain. They came down just behind the Fish Market. We're taking them to the central police station. The Army can collect them there–"

"You're shitting well not," Schulze burst in savagely, his teeth bared like those of some wild animal.

"Schulze!" barked von Dodenburg.

But the big Hamburger was beyond listening. He stared at the RAF men, a couple of them who were injured, his eyes glittering crazily. "Those sodding bastards don't deserve to sit out the rest of the war in some shitty POW camp, living off their Red Cross parcels. Not when they've done this." He swung his big hand, with the pistol in it, around at the fiery burning background. "They're not soldiers – they're cold-blooded killers!"

"Now careful, Sergeant," the bigger cop said. "You can't talk like that. We've got our orders–"

"Piss up your sleeve," Schulze swung round to von Dodenburg. "What do you say, sir? Are we going to let the Tommy bastards get away with this? Isn't it our duty to punish them – here and now?"

Captain von Dodenburg bit his lip. He thought of the blind amputees crawling on their stumps to the safety of the station, the naked old crone with her dead infant, the bodies hanging in the trees; then he looked at the Tommies staring at the armed SS men uncomprehendingly.

"Put them against that wall," he snapped suddenly.

"Hey, you can't do that," the bigger cop said angrily.

"Hold yer trap and give your arse a chance," Schulze roared, pushing him aside as he tried to place his fat body in front of his prisoners.

The other one tried to bring up his pistol, but one of the troopers brought his rifle butt down sharply onto his arm. He howled with sudden pain and his pistol dropped to the littered cobbles with a clatter of metal.

"What's going on here?" cried a burly Tommy with a great curling moustache stained red with the blood running down the side of his face, in broken German. "We're prisoners of–" He broke off suddenly. The looks on the sweating faces of the young SS troopers told him all he wanted to know.

A red-haired Tommy, who looked all of seventeen, standing next to him asked him something in alarm. But the one who spoke German shook his head and put out his hand to steady him. To no effect. The red-haired kid dropped on his knees and raising his hands in the traditional posture of supplication, he babbled something in English. His words ended in a shriek of pain, as one of the troopers, beside himself with rage at what he had seen that night, kicked him squarely in the mouth.

Thereafter the RAF men remained silent. Wordlessly they allowed themselves to be lined up against the nearest wall, tugging the sobbing red-haired youth with them. They tried to raise him to his feet. But failed. So they stood there, their faces ruddy and sweaty against the flames, their eyes blank of fear and hate – blank of any emotion at all.

Von Dodenburg lined his men up to face them. Without an order, they raised their rifles. The Captain brought up his Schmeisser, while the two elderly cops looked on in horrified impotence. One word of protest from them and they knew they would join the RAF men; they were both veterans of the trenches in the First War. They'd seen men like these, shocked out of their minds by the horrors of war before, and knew there was no stopping them now.

For a moment nothing happened. The Tommies about to die stared numbly at their killers. There was no sound save the steady crackle of the flames and the thick sobbing of the boy with the ruined mouth.

'Fire!" von Dodenburg screamed suddenly. Almost without knowing he pressed the trigger of his machine pistol. It crackled into life at his side. At such close range, his burst ripped the face off the Tommy with the big moustache, transforming it into a shapeless red pulp. Then the others joined

in the murder of the RAF prisoners.

It was all over in a matter of seconds. For a moment they stood there, listening to the heavy echoing silence, while the two elderly cops stared at them open-mouthed. Before them the smoking bodies sprawled out now in the careless, abandoned postures of the violently done-to-death. The bigger of the two policemen raised his thick forefinger and pointed it accusingly at von Dodenburg. "You... you," he began, but no other words came.

Von Dodenburg swallowed. His mouth was abruptly terribly dry. "Follow me," he whispered hoarsely.

Obediently they turned and followed him towards the station, stumbling through the smoking debris of a dying Hamburg, their chests heaving violently as if they had just run a great race. Behind them the two elderly cops did not move, the bigger one his thick forefinger still pointing as if in eternal accusation.

CHAPTER 5

The order came from the Berlin Headquarters of the Armed SS. It read:

> In view of the exceedingly efficient manner in which the SS Assault Battalion Wotan recently executed its arduous mission during the English air gangsters' terror attack on the Free Hansa City of Hamburg, the Reichsführer SS takes pleasure in granting the Battalion a three day stand down from its training schedule. This order is to take effect immediately.
> Heil Hitler!
>
> Signed Himmler.

And even the Vulture dared not disobey the order from the ex-chicken farmer who was now the most feared man in Europe. Reluctantly he granted the whole Battalion three days' local leave, and cursed the Reichsführer SS to high heaven as he signed the order which Captain von Dodenburg set before him.

But the men of Wotan took no pleasure in this surprise respite from the dreary round of training. Those three terrible days in the dying Hamburg, which they'd ended by bulldozing the great heaps of dead into mass graves, had taken their toll. And there was not one of them who wanted to do anything else but blot out the ghastly memories of that place – with its 40,000 dead within five hours – by means of massive doses of alcohol.

Even the seventeen-year-old greenbeaks, who had never touched a glass of beer before they had been rushed to Hamburg, went out that first day and began to drink themselves into insensibility with dogged and sullen determination, pouring the Korn and Pils into themselves in the dark little bars all over the provincial city, oblivious to the severe looks of the elderly gentlemen sitting round the regulars' stammtische tables playing skat.

Sergeant Schulze hardly waited for County Leader Schmeer to leave the house with his daughter before he blundered in through the kitchen door, his cap on the back of his head, his tunic ripped open and his big face flushed a sullen red.

Mrs Schmeer, ten years younger than her husband, but just as fat, was

standing at the oven watching Heidi frying his favourite Schnitzel and potatoes.

"Won't be long my big hero," she chirped, her face flushed with cooking. "I want to get it just right for you."

Heidi of the big knockers kept her head bent pretending she wasn't aware of the big NCO's presence. Schulze, already very drunk from the Korn he had been pouring down his throat all afternoon, was in no mood for Frau Schmeer or her Schnitzel. What he wanted this day was oblivion. With an angry swipe of his big hand, he sent the frying pan flying.

"Stick yer Schnitzel up your fat arse," he snarled drunkenly, nearly falling over, "piss off into the cellar and get me a bottle of Schnaps – two bottles!"

Heidi bent down to pick up the meat, but he caught her by the blouse to stop her. It ripped badly. Her massive breasts, unrestrained by any bra, tumbled out. She screamed and tried to cover them with her hands.

,"Get those hands away," he cried, "I want to see yer tits!"

"But my big hero," Mrs Schmeer protested, too concerned that he might not give her what she needed in bed that evening to be angry about the Schnitzel. "You can't do–"

"Have you got cloth ears – have you been eating big beans?" he bellowed. "Can't you hear me? I said – piss off into the cellar and get me something to drink. I'm going upstairs with Heidi and I want something to drink before I push it in her... Now fetch that flaming bottle of booze, will you?"

"But she's my maid. You can't–"

"Fetch it!" Schulze raised his big fist threateningly and she fled in alarm, while the big Sergeant stamped unsteadily upstairs, dragging the screaming, half-naked maid with him.

But when Frau Schmeer timorously knocked on the maid's door and crept in, holding the tray as if she were ready to drop it and run at any moment, Schulze's rage had fled. Heidi was standing in the centre of the room, her enormous breasts uncovered staring down puzzled at a Schulze who lay on his stomach on the bed, sobbing hopelessly, beating the bed every now and again with his big fist and crying in his utter despair, "Why did it shitting well have to happen... oh, why?"

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There were many others of the Wotan Battalion who could not answer that overwhelming question. Captain von Dodenburg was one. He staggered blindly through the Cathedral city's evening streets, while Schwarz, just as drunk, marched blankly at his side. Everywhere there were drunken SS men, crowding the straight-laced, shocked civilians off the pavements, forgetting to salute the officers and NCOs (who were just as intoxicated), urinating against house walls to the horror of the prudish Catholic housewives.

Von Dodenburg was vaguely aware that they were from the Wotan and that their behaviour this day had ruined the Battalion's reputation for discipline and order in Paderborn. But he did not care. All he could see in his mind's eye were the dead babies hanging in the stripped trees like monstrous human fruit.

"I don't care, I don't care, Schwarz," he mumbled drunkenly and nearly tripped. Gravely Schwarz steadied him and nodded his crazy head, muttering something unintelligible.

They stumbled on. Then a voice interrupted their confused reverie as they turned into the central square. "Gentlemen – gentlemen, how glad I am to see you." A hand caught hold of von Dodenburg's arm and pulled him to a stop.

With a great effort of will, von Dodenburg turned slowly. A blurred brown outline filled his vision. He shook his head stupidly to bring it into focus. A pig-like shining Westphalian face above a brown SA uniform appeared with next to it a blonde head of hair, rolled into little 'snails' over the ears, supported by a well-filled German Maiden uniform.

"Captain von Dodenburg – Lieutenant Schwarz," the pig face said jovially.

"Don't know you," von Dodenburg said thickly, slurring his words. "Shit off," he threw off the restraining hand and staggered on.

"Grab hold of him, Karin, for Christ's sake," Schmeer snapped to his daughter, while he hung on to Schwarz. "He's going to get himself in trouble with the chain dogs if they catch him in that state."

"At your service," Karin answered cheekily. "You've always been good at giving orders, County Leader."

All the same she ran quickly after von Dodenburg while her father beamed at Schwarz and said, "I think one more beer, Lieutenant, and then I feel I should show you some of those little pleasures that I promised you the

last time we met. What do you say, Lieutenant Schwarz?"

Schwarz belched and nodded his crazy head. "Beer... pleasures," he mumbled.

Schmeer waited till his daughter had caught up with the other officer and thrust her arm under his, steadying him somewhat as he blundered his way through a crocodile of giggling young chaplains, before turning back to Schwarz again.

"All right, Lieutenant, now we've got rid of her, I think we can go."

Obediently Schwarz allowed himself to be led into the dark cobbled, grass-overgrown streets that smelled of ancient lecheries and unwashed bodies, while the heavy frowning facade of the great Gothic cathedral stared down at them in silent reproach.

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Her firm arms ringed his neck and she thrust her tongue between his open lips. He smelled of beer, but she didn't care. Her whole body was trembling with desire, and she could feel her nipples growing erect. Savagely she thrust her soft stomach into his. But there was no stirring there as yet.

"Shit – shit on the Christmas Tree," she cursed.

But he didn't seem to hear. He just stood there swaying, as if he was concentrating his whole energy on remaining erect. Swiftly she released her hold and when she was sure he would not fall back onto her bed, surveyed by the Führer's scowling face, she pulled the buttons of her skirt and let it fall. Impatiently she ripped off her blouse, watching him all the time. But her sudden nakedness did not seem to affect him.

For a moment she hesitated. Almost unconsciously she ran her hands over her big breasts and gently squeezed the now erect nipples. Then she tugged at her pants, white, simple and the kind schoolgirls wore. Provocatively she thrust out the black thatch at his belly. But still he did not react.

"Come on you big, handsome, aristocratic bastard," she hissed, "get it up. I want it!"

She placed the elegant hands she had so admired the first time she had met the young officer onto her breasts, hard and swollen with desire now.

"But you're only sixteen," he said thickly, speaking for the first time since she had sneaked him up the stairs to her own bedroom.

She laughed cynically. "What difference does it make?" She thrust her belly against him and ran her hot little tongue into his ear momentarily. "Sixteen or sixty – it's just the same, save it's tighter."

With a practised hand she ripped open his flies like a factory worker pulling a lever and thrust her hands into the dark cave of his field-grey breeches and ran her greedy fingers over what she found there.

Suddenly, as if a dam had burst, it worked. She could feel it growing by the instant. Unable to control the trembling of her legs, she drew him carefully to the bed, still greedily holding on to it. She lowered herself and spread her legs.

"It'll hurt," he said thickly, but it was desire not drink which was distorting his speech now.

"What?"

"This." He touched the delightful thing with his elegant hand. "If you're a virgin."

She nearly laughed in his handsome face. But she did not want to hurt him. "Yes, of course," she said and then *sotto voce,* "But not this year, Captain von Dodenburg, sir."

Swiftly she raised her long slim brown legs high in the air to make a cradle for his hard young muscular body. "I think it's time to climb aboard, Captain von Dodenburg," she whispered hoarsely, her lips suddenly very dry and her heart pounding almost unbearably.

As he descended upon her eagerly, the last thing she caught sight of was the Führer's face staring down at her in black disapproval of such un-Maidenly conduct. Then she gasped with pleasure and forgot everything else.

***

The whores were dark, flashy, exotic and somehow un-German. But their accents were pure harsh East Westphalian. And they were afraid of his uniform with its silver SS runes, even Schwarz's befuddled drunken brain could recognise that.

But the pot-bellied County Leader was well known there. He clapped the tired-looking Madam across her fat, black-silk buttocks and cried joyfully. "No beer tonight, Rachel. In honour of my young friend here, I think we'll have champus!"

"Champus," the dark-eyed whores cried in faked enthusiasm.

"You're in for five hundred marks already this month, County Leader," the middle-aged Madam with dyed hair said wearily, as if she had made the same statement many times before and knew she were wasting her breath.

"I know my beautiful Rachel," Schmeer chortled. "But if the worst comes to the worst, the Reichsführer SS will solve that problem for me, won't he?" He looked at her cunningly for a moment with his small piggish eyes and made a strange spiralling gesture with his fat forefinger like smoke going up a chimney. The Madam blanched.

"All right, County Leader, champus it'll be." Hastily she waddled away to fetch the champagne.

Schmeer beamed and nudged Schwarz. "That's the way to treat 'em. Sugar and the whip as the Führer used to say in the old days that gets 'em working."

Schwarz nodded blindly and slumped down in the nearest armchair. Immediately one of the dark-haired whores, her sallow cheeks heavy with rouge, her body covered in a black silk petticoat plumped herself on his lap and began to run her hands over his body in routine passion.

The cheap sweet French champagne began to flow. The girls relaxed. As the alcohol started to have its effect, they became more and more abandoned. Giggling hysterically a couple of them dipped a befuddled Schwarz's middle finger into a glass of champagne and maintained loudly that the distorted reflection would indicate the size of his organ.

A red-faced Schmeer joined in the fun. He allowed the Madam and another whore – a skinny girl clad only in a black corset and silk stockings – to take off his brown boots and breeches, laughing uproariously as they tugged hard at the tight breeches and nearly fell over when they slipped back abruptly.

As two of the others danced obscenely, cheek to cheek, their hands clasped round each other's buttocks like apache dancers, the Madam and the skinny whore occupied themselves with Schmeer's flaccid organ dangling below an enormous white hairless belly, while the County Leader laughed with uncontrollable laughter at the antics of the other two girls.

The room in the cheap brothel began to revolve around Schwarz. The girls' drunken giggles and the pleasure grunts made by a red-faced County Leader grew and receded like the ebb and flow of waves. Vaguely he was aware of the dark whore on his lap nuzzling her wet sensual lips against his face. The grunts grew ever louder; the giggles more shrill; the waves receded

ever further. Then suddenly he was gone and a great darkness descended before his eyes.

He came to in a dirty rumpled bed with the whore who had sat on his lap bending over him, her face strained and tired. yet somehow concerned, as she wiped his face with cold water in almost a motherly fashion.

"You all right, Lieutenant?" she asked.

His black eyes stared up at her blankly and then swept around the grubby little bedroom with the red marks of squashed bedbugs on the unpainted walls and patched tears in the blackout curtains made of dyed blankets. His eyes came to an abrupt halt. A coat was hanging from a bent nail behind the door. It was shabby and worn, just like the room. But it wasn't its shabbiness which caught Schwarz's attention. It was the yellow emblem sewn prominently on its left breast.

Her weary eyes followed the direction of his gaze. "Yours?" he breathed, the sight shocking a reaction even out of his befuddled crazy brain.

She nodded slowly.

"But it's the Jewish Star!"

"I know – the Star of David... I'm Jewish, Lieutenant."

"Jewish?" he echoed in horror. "Half?"

"No," she shook her head firmly. "Full. Both my parents were orthodox." She shrugged carelessly. "Not me, though. And then this–" she left the sentence unfinished and stared down at him unconcerned, as if there were nothing strange about a full Jewess confessing her crime to an SS officer in the year 1943.

"But... how?" He stuttered horrified, trying to find words to express his outrage.

"How?" she laughed cynically. "Easy. There are many who come here especially, like County Leader Schmeer. We're all Jewish here, and they know it. It has a particular sexual appeal for them. Party officials, SS men, officers like you. They can insult us. They can beat us. They can try out their little perversions – like Schmeer – and there is an extra pleasure in it for them because we are Jewish. And after all, it's better than the camps, you know?" She raised her tired voice and repeated the fixed tenet of the Party, "Jews are the cancer of society and must be removed with surgical ruthlessness!" She grinned bitterly and slumped down on the sagging bug-ridden bed next to him.

He recoiled. "Don't touch me Jewess," he cried. "Don't!" Her hands

caressed his body and he could feel the horror of her dirty Jewish fingers fumbling with his clothes.

"Why not, my little SS man?" she whispered. "Men are men, aren't they – whether they're Aryan or Jewish?" Now she had opened his flies and was fondling him. "Don't fight me, let me love you," she urged with professional hoarseness. "Let me show you we are no different. We have hearts and bodies and –"

He summoned up all his strength, and pushed. "Let me go," he screamed in a broken voice. "For God's sake, let me go – please Jewess. Please!"

As she fell to one side in surprise, he sprang drunkenly from the bed and ran to the door in a blind panic. Flinging it open, he slipped and fell down the narrow dark stairs. But he didn't seem to feel the pain in his haste to get away from the girl. He blundered into the dusky-red reception room, nearly knocking over the skinny whore in black stockings who was bent busily over Schmeer's hairless pot-belly.

"Jesus, Mary, Joseph!" he cursed angrily, starting up out of his ecstasy, "what in the hell's name has got into you, Schwarz?"

But the SS officer was already fumbling frantically with the outside door. He, could not get it open. In his haste he kicked it savagely. It flew open and he blundered out into the night. Seconds later he was leaning against the wall in the back alley, which stank of cabbage and cat's piss, retching miserably, as if he would never stop. At his side, a worried Schmeer, a tablecloth hurriedly wrapped around his naked belly, and the Jewish whore, the tell-tale coat slung over her bare shoulders, stared at him in awed bewilderment.

Finally they managed to persuade him to come inside again, after the whore had used Schmeer's tablecloth to clean his lips of the vomit. His thin shoulders heaving as if he were sobbing violently, though his crazy face was blank of tears or any other expression of emotion, he allowed himself to be led into the brothel. The door closed behind the strange little group once more.

As it did so, Metzger got up unsteadily from behind the ashcans where he had hidden as soon as he had recognised Lieutenant Schwarz. He wiped the rotting vegetables off his knees and swayed once more with the load of schnapps and beer he had taken aboard at the Ratskeller that evening. His eyes gleamed with triumph, for in spite of his drunkenness he had not failed

to spot that yellow star the whore had worn. She was a Yid and she had been with County Leader shitty Schmeer who had been slipping his Lore a link while he had been away at the front fighting for Folk, Fatherland and Führer.

"Now you fat bastard of a golden pheasant," he breathed triumphantly at the closed door, "I've got you, got you right by your bloody eggs!" He tried to adjust his cap to the correct military angle and failed miserably. But he didn't care. As he emerged from the stinking alley into the blacked-out square, he thrust out his big chest and marched towards his flat, as if he were in charge of the guard at the Führer's Headquarters itself, his little red eyes gleaming vindictively. County Leader Schmeer was as good as dead already.

CHAPTER 6

"You're a lot of wet tails – soft wet tails, full of piss and fried potatoes!" the Vulture rasped in his high-pitched Prussian voice, staring down at them from the deck of the new Tiger, the sweat streaming down his monstrous nose.

The 800-odd young men of Wotan, the elite of the National Socialist state, stared up at him wordlessly, their open sun-burned faces serious and worried.

"You've been too long in the Homeland," the Vulture continued. "Been too busy filling your guts. Too busy pushing an easy ball. You forget that we are fighting a war of survival and that at this very moment, good men – better men than you – are dying by their hundreds in the East so that you parasites can live an easy life here in Westphalia. But it's going to stop, I can tell you that. Great crap on the Christmas Tree, it's going to stop!" He brought his riding cane down hard against the side of his boot and one or two of the young men in the front rank jumped startled. "Even if I have to kill every single one of you greenbeaks in the process!"

The Vulture swung his angry burning eyes around their faces as they stood there in the white-hot June afternoon, grouped around the first squadron of Tigers which had been delivered from the railhead that very morning.

"You men must learn that we do not play games in SS Assault Battalion Wotan. We are the Führer's elite – the Führer's Fire Brigade, I believe, is the term that is used in headquarters. But at the moment you men, thin streaks of piss that you are, couldn't put out a grassfire." He looked down at them scornfully. "Because you're soft. Soft, do you understand? Soft as shit! Today the kid gloves are finally off, I can promise you that. Today you are going to learn what it means to have the honour of serving in the Führer's Fire Brigade."

He drew a deep breath and made a visible effort to control himself, though as an admiring von Dodenburg, watching his CO's tremendous performance, knew the Vulture was in complete charge of his faculties. His rage was deliberate and artificial, meant to sting the young recruits to the Battalion into a reaction – any reaction.

"Behind me," he snapped, "you will be able to see a thirty seven millimetre anti-tank gun. Not a very powerful weapon admittedly, but one which can give you a nice little headache at close range if it hits you." He smiled thinly at his own humour, but there was no answering gleam in his cold eyes.

"Under me, there is a metal steed that can be stopped by no known anti-tank canon, if it is handled correctly." He kicked the Tiger's great turret with his gleaming spurred riding boot which he always wore although he had left the cavalry in 1937. "The glacis plate of the Tiger cannot be penetrated by a thirty-seven millimetre shell even at a range of two hundred metres. Of course it's unpleasant to hear the shells knocking at your front door at such short range," he grinned down at their earnest young faces cynically. "But then there are those who cream their drawers when a window rattles on a dark night."

He raised his voice. "Now today it is my intention to start making men out of, you greenbeaks. Every tank crew in the battalion will drive down the course which has been staked out behind you at a speed of twenty kilometres an hour. As soon as your vehicle reaches the green marker, Lieutenant Schwarz and Captain von Dodenburg manning the 37-mm will open fire." He paused for the expected gasp of surprise, and got it.

The Vulture grinned thinly and continued. "The 37 will fire three shells. When your vehicle reaches the white marker here – at two hundred metres range – the tank commander will break right and drive off the range. One word of warning, however. If any one of you decides to break off before he reaches that white marker, I shall order Lieutenant Schwarz and Captain von Dodenburg to open fire at the vehicle's flank. And let there be no doubt about it: at that range a 37-mm can penetrate even the Tiger. Someone will get more than creamed skivvies. He'll get a very bloody nose."

He let his words sink in for a moment, then he blew his whistle. At the far end of the range, Schulze's driver started up his engine with a roar. The monstrous sixty-ton Tiger with its great hooded overhanging 88-mm cannon lumbered forward. The men of the Wotan scattered, while Schwarz and von Dodenburg ran towards the anti-tank gun.

"Fire!" the Vulture yelled, as Schulze's tank crossed the start-line.

At that range Schwarz could not miss. The white tracer hissed flatly across the range, striking the centre of the Tiger's glacis plate. Momentarily the metal glowed a dull red. Then the shell went soaring upwards into the

deep blue sky like a cheap penny rocket. Hastily von Dodenburg reloaded, the sweat pouring down his face. Schwarz snatched the firing lever again. A blast of hot air hit von Dodenburg in the face like a flabby fist. He gasped, automatically opening his mouth to prevent his eardrums from being burst, and stared over the shield.

The shell smacked home with a great hollow clang of metal striking metal. The Tiger rocked slightly. But again the 37-mm shell went soaring off like a golf ball, leaving a bright new silver scar on the glacis plate.

Just before Schulze's Tiger reached the white marker, Schwarz fired for the last time. Sparks flew from the front of the tank and it reared up on its hind sprockets like a bucking horse; then Schulze's Tiger was swivelling round crazily, throwing up a huge cloud of dust.

"Three direct hits," the Vulture rasped through his megaphone, staring down at the awed, round-eyed troopers, "and not one penetration. That, as even your thick heads can undoubtedly perceive, makes the Tiger a war-winning weapon. Now–"

"But, sir," Horten, Schwarz's second-in-command, broke in. "Can we afford to allow our new vehicles to be damaged in an exercise like this? Surely the demonstration we have just seen should suffice to convince us of the value of this weapon made by our folk-comrades?"

The Vulture looked down at the pale-faced young second lieutenant who had just joined the Battalion from the Bad Toelz Officer School the month before, as if he had just popped up from the earth.

"My dear Horten," he rasped. "Your folk-comrades, as you call them, are the scum of Europe, bribed or beaten to come to Germany to work in our industries. Before I would trust my life to the workmanship of some Polack or spaghetti-eater, I would want to see how the vehicle they have produced stands up to fire. Unfortunately in actual battle, my dear Horten, as you will undoubtedly find out, the Popovs don't allow one to settle down in the middle of the fight and make up for the deficiencies – or sabotage, if you like – of your *folk-comrades*."

There was some sniggering in the rear ranks of the Battalion and Horten's pale face flushed red with embarrassment. He opened his mouth to say something else, but the Vulture didn't give him a chance.

"Mount up!" he yelled through the megaphone. "Every crew to its vehicle!"

Hastily the SS men broke ranks and doubled across the uneven range

towards the waiting steel monsters. The next instant the still afternoon was broken by the roar of engine after engine bursting into powerful life. One after the other the raw crews rattled down the range to face up to their frightening baptism of fire. Time and time again there was the angry whang of metal striking metal. Young troopers staggered out of the vehicles, white-faced and shocked. Others did not manage to clamber out of the turrets, but vomited where they stood, their heads ringing still with the impact of the 37-mm shells at such close range.

But the Vulture would not allow any let-up. He urged more fresh crews into the Tigers, chivvying the young soldiers with his cynical rasping voice, while von Dodenburg sweated over the breech of the red-hot anti-tank gun, the pile of gleaming smoking shell cases mounting ever higher behind him.

And then it happened. A frightened tank commander ordered his Tiger to break away after the second shell had jarred his tank from side to side. The Vulture, his eyes gleaming angrily, did not hesitate.

"Schwarz," he yelled above the roar of the tiger's. great engines. "Let him have it to the right of the turret mount!"

Schwarz, his eye glued to the rubber eye-piece, took a quick aim. The next instant he fired. The 37-mm canon jerked wildly, its trails starting up from the dusty ground. But no one had eyes for the anti-tank gun. Their gaze was fixed on the Tiger.

Schwarz's shell caught the tank exactly at its weak spot –the turret ring. Angry red sparks flew up from the thin metal. It heaved back on its sprockets like a live thing. A sharp spike of ugly yellow flame stabbed out of its engine cowling. There was a gasp of horror from the spectators.

"Bale out... for Chrissake – bale out!" von Dodenburg yelled wildly. He dropped the shell he was holding and doubled forward. His move broke the spell. Suddenly they were all running towards the fiercely burning Tiger from which dark shapes were now tumbling blindly, screaming in agonized pain.

But their aid came too late for the tank commander who had been too scared to face up to that last shell. He lay dead on the scorched grass, angry blue flames still licking his blackened body.

Carelessly the Vulture turned the body over with his elegantly booted foot, and stared down at the black-charred face in bored curiosity. "As I thought," rasped. "Friend Horten of the anthropological studies." He looked at von Dodenburg cynically and then removing his polished riding boot allowed the body to fall on its first-burst stomach again. "Well, now he

knows that the length of your foreskin is no indication of your bravery, what, von Dodenburg!"

The Vulture slapped his cane against his boot. "All right, you wet tails," he roared at the wide-eyed young soldiers crowding in on all sides to get a glimpse at the dead officer sprawled out extravagantly in the blackened grass. "So you've seen your first stiff. Good. Now then, let's get on with the exercise, yes?"

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Time was running out. That was clear even to the rawest recruit of SS Assault Battalion Wotan. Every day the Vulture stepped up the pressure – platoon-strength attack, company-attack, battalion-attack; tank support attack with infantry; night attacks; partisan defence attacks. Hour after hour from six in the morning until late at night when the red ball of the June sun finally sank below the flat Westphalian horizon and the recruits could stagger off blindly to their bunks, the veteran NCOs and officers of the old Wotan poured the knowledge of four years of war into the greenbeaks' ears.

"At night when the Ivan T-34s come at yer, don't wet yer knickers, let them have a couple of star shells straight to the turret. That'll blind the Ivan gunner long enough for even duds like you to get in the first shot."

"Wait till the T-34s breast the rise. Then you've got 'em by the short, black and curlies. Their big old guts – with no armour – will be showing. Zap! Yer let 'em have one there, just as if yer slipping yer girlfriend a quick link. That is – those of you who like girls..."

"Their tank radio communication is crap – virtually nonexistent. The Ivans can't build radios because they've got six shitty fingers on each dirty hand. So what happens when they try to launch a concentrated attack? I'll tell you, wet tails. They get out little flags and start signalling to each other like a lot of shitty boy scouts. What do you do? You let the first Popov who pokes his head up with flags have a nice long burst of MG fire. Then the whole attack will fall apart. Because that Popov will undoubtedly be the company or battalion commander. And the Popovs go ape-shit when they've got nobody to give 'em orders."

"Flank 'em – always flank 'em. One Tiger is good enough to take on a whole company of T-34s from the flank. Suspension, turret ring, engine cowling – you can pick 'em off one by one from the flank. You'll really have

'em by the juicy nuts. But remember this, the T-34's glacis plate is as tough as that of the Tiger. So if you don't want to die for Folk, Fatherland and Führer earlier than you're going to do anyway, remember that flank. Flank."

And so it went on. Von Dodenburg found that Karin Schmeer's exciting nubile body could hardly keep him awake, just as Sergeant Schulze discovered that her mother's Schnitzel and fried potatoes had begun to lose their attraction, whereas Metzger's suspicions of his Lore were muted somewhat by his fear that the intensive training meant the Battalion was going to be sent to the Eastern Front yet once more.

And Sergeant Metzger was quite correct in his fears. On the 20th June, 1943, battalion commanders and their company commanders were summoned urgently to divisional headquarters at Bielefeld for an immediate briefing by the divisional commander himself.

Sepp Dietrich, the stocky, tough ex-World War I tank sergeant, who had formed the 'Bodyguard' way back in the old days of the Party's fight for power, was in his usual swaggering, quick-witted Bavarian form, helped no doubt by the half-bottle of schnapps he had usually consumed by midday.

"Gentlemen," he began without any preliminaries, as soon as the officers had settled down in the map room, "the High Command has really given us a juicy one this time." He struck the big wall map of the central section of the Russian Front. "We've got the point with the Gross-Deutschland, the elite motorised division. And just because they're not SS doesn't mean they're wimps. Our initial target is Prokhorovka so that we can outflank Kursk. When we've done that – and Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we shall do it with 700 vehicles under command including 100 Tigers – we'll push forward to link up with Model's army coming down from the north." He picked up the glass of Korn which the orderly always kept close to his right hand, and downed it in one gulp. "Most of you have cured your throat ache, I see. But there'll be some other kind of tin, and promotion in this one for the lot of you." His brown eyes twinkled merrily and he stuck out his cleft bully boy's jaw aggressively. "I want a corps out of this one, gentlemen, so I want no-one slipping up. Or by the Great Whore of Buxtehude, I'll want to know why! Understood?"

"Understood, General!" they roared back in unison, including the Vulture who had no great respect for Dietrich's talent as a commander.

"Good. But I don't want you to get the impression that this is going to be a nice little comfortable Viennese waltz. The Soviets have got tremendous

defences south of Kursk." He slapped the map with his bruiser's fist. "They've dug themselves everywhere in their hedgehogs, covered by four or five pieces of artillery each. According to the head of Intelligence, the Old Fox's men, they're expecting a tank attack in the area so their plan is to let the tanks swing by their strong points and wait for the follow-up infantry. Good, let the bastards wait." He smiled, showing his strong, white teeth under the trim little moustache. "They can wait till the Day of Judgement as far as I am concerned. The Bodyguard will take its infantry with it on the backs of the Tigers. When we've linked up with Model's Army and the Popovs are still scratching their hairy backsides and wondering *what happened to the Germanskis*, then we can start sorting out their fine hedgehogs. All the same you'd better hear what exactly the Popovs have got waiting for us south of Kursk." He raised his voice and barked, "Kraemer, come and play my Chief-of-Staff. And Orderly, bring me another goddam drink before I die of thirst!"

With a sigh Kraemer, Dietrich's elegant Regular Army Chief-of-Staff, who had often confided to the Vulture that his boss could not even read a map, stepped into the centre of the group and began rattling off the statistics.

"The depth of defence of the Central and Varonezh Fronts on the axes of German attack reach from 120 to 170 kilometres." Even the hard-bitten battalion commanders of the Führer's Fire Brigade could not fight back their gasps of surprise; but Kraemer did not seem to hear. "The Soviets have dug some 5000 kilometres of trenches and have laid approximately 400,000 bombs and ground mines. There are some 2,400 anti-tank and 2,700 anti-personnel mines per kilometre of front – six times that of the defence of Moscow and four times that of Stalingrad last year. The Soviets have also given their anti-aircraft defences great attention. According to the Old Fox's spies, they have nine anti-aircraft artillery divisions, plus 40 regiments–"

"Enough, enough," Dietrich broke in suddenly. "Christ, Kraemer, do you want to frighten the life out of them?"

"I'm simply giving them the facts, General," Kraemer said without rancour, as if he had gone through similar scenes many times before.

"Facts!" Dietrich snorted. "Soldiers can't concern themselves with facts. If they did, they'd never even go into action. They'd be too petrified by the knowledge that, according to the statistics, one of the pieces of shit flying around must have their number on it." He eyed the assembled officers, a rogueish look in his brown eyes. "Gentlemen, I suggest that since you know what is expected of us in this new mission and – thanks to my little ray of

sunshine here, Kraemer – what kind of shiny opposition we can anticipate, you leave here and do what every soldier should before he goes into battle – get a snootful of booze and get himself laid, if he can." He raised his voice and bellowed, "Orderly – the drinks!"

A group of white-coated mess waiters came hurrying in, bearing silver trays of ice-cold glasses of Korn. Hastily they passed them out to the officers.

Sepp Dietrich raised his glass. "Gentlemen, to the success of Operation Citadel!" he roared.

"Operation Citadel!" they bellowed in unison.

In one gulp they downed the fiery spirit. The next instant the room was full of the noise of splintering glass, as officer after officer flung his glass into the stone fireplace.

CHAPTER 7

Von Dodenburg shook his head and the room came into focus. But his vision was still blurred. He shook his head again, a little more forcefully, and wished a second later that he hadn't.

Slowly, carefully, he let his eyes wander round the room. Her clothes were everywhere. The white cotton slip, such as schoolgirls wore, on the floor; her pants screwed into a ball flung on the dresser, as if she hadn't been able to get them off quickly enough; her sweater spread-eagled over the end of the big bed, the arms thrust out, like a headless swimmer.

Karin was still sleeping peacefully, face down on the rumpled stained bed, the feather quilt thrown back impatiently the way children do in their sleep. But there was nothing childlike in the brown-tanned naked body at his side. The dark down revealed from under one raised arm, the plump curve of the breast, the rise of the buttocks and the pubic puff between her spread legs – they all indicated a woman: an experienced woman.

In spite of her sixteen years, there was nothing sexually immature about Karin Schmeer. When Schulze had deposited him, weaving drunkenly from Bielefeld, outside her door, she had not hesitated; ignoring the big-breasted maid's shocked looks, she had almost dragged him up to her bedroom and started puffing off her clothes with excited trembling hands.

Thereafter the night had been one frantic bout of lovemaking after another, as if the teenaged girl could not get enough to satiate the burning lust which tore at her body. Finally he had pleaded he must sleep and although she had cried bitterly, he had drifted into a dream-racked sleep in which he saw the battalion standing completely naked on some God-forsaken burning Russian steppe while monstrous Soviet tanks mowed them down calmly and deliberately as if engaged in a peacetime exercise.

At his side Karin groaned. She turned, opened her eyes and put her brown arms round his neck. "Kiss me," she whispered through cracked, scummed lips.

He did so. But there was no conviction in his kiss, and she knew it. She drew back and surveyed him for a moment. Then she pushed back a lock of the long blonde hair which had fallen over her brow.

"What's the matter?" she asked soberly, without any emotion.

He shrugged his naked shoulders. "This I suppose."

"Why?"

"Somehow it's wrong. I mean you're only a schoolgirl and I'm an SS officer. I've had experience–" He broke off a little helplessly, not able to find the right words to express himself.

"Don't you think I've had other men, Kuno?" she asked.

"Obviously. But what if your father found out? What would he think of my – well you know?"

She grinned cynically and ran her hands over her full breasts contemptuously. "Him! He doesn't care. All he cares about it filling his own pockets and those Jewish whores down in the old city, who let him play out his dirty little tricks because they're scared to death he might put them in the camps if they didn't."

"Filling his pockets – Jewish whores – in National Socialist Germany!" von Dodenburg stuttered.

She smiled at his bewilderment, and not taking her eyes off him, reached out for a cigarette. "A German woman does not use make-up or smoke," she said and lit it. Blowing out a long stream of contented blue smoke, she added. "Don't look at me like that, Captain von Dodenburg! Shit! Where have you been all these last years since 1939, eh?"

"At the front."

"The front – oh, there!" she said carelessly, as if it were as far away as Mars. "I understand. But you must understand too, that this is Germany 1943. Things have changed."

"How have things changed?" he persisted, although he could already feel her free hand fondling him, a look of dreamy amusement on her young face.

"Just changed. People are out for themselves." Her cunning hands were stroking him into excitement now with soft feathery movements like those of some Parisian whore.

"You are just a child, what do you know?" he persisted, trying to fight back the desire which had begun to bubble up within his loins once more.

"Child," she whispered huskily. "Put your arms around me and I'll show you whether I am a child or not."

He attempted to push her hand away, but she held on to him tightly, as if she could not bear to let go of this source of intense delight. He could feel her body begin to tremble with desire.

"Come on," she urged and slowly began to open her long brown legs.

In spite of himself, he threw his right leg over her, ready to mount. But fate had decreed otherwise. He would never make love to Karin Schmeer again. Just as she began to draw up her legs to receive him, there was a thunderous knock on the door and a well-known voice called.

"It's only me, sir."

Next moment Schulze burst in, clad only in his boots and vest, a half empty bottle of Korn in one hand, the other clasping the enormous right breast of the hopelessly drunk and giggling maid, who was completely naked.

"Sir–" he stopped suddenly when he realized what von Dodenburg was about to do. "The Prussians don't shoot that quickly, sir!" he cried, a huge grin spreading over his cheeky waterfront face.

"What the devil do you think you're up to, Schulze?" von Dodenburg yelled angrily, hastily pulling the feather quilt over himself and the girl, her legs still raised expectantly.

"Don't get angry, sir. I'm just doing my duty – sorry that I had to interrupt you in yours," he added with a knowing grin at the girl.

"Get on with it. What damn duty?"

"Dehn, you know him, sir?"

Von Dodenburg nodded.

"Well, sir, I told him last night where to find us if anything came up."

"And?"

"It's come up, sir – like a couple of other things this night, no doubt."

"What, man? Spit it out."

"We're off. Dehn just got me and the maid here out of the pit to tell us. Now he's waiting outside with the Volkswagen."

"Heaven, arse and twine, man," von Dodenburg exploded. "What are you talking about? Where are we off to?"

"To the front, sir. We march in twelve hours' time."

***

The growing knowledge that the Battalion would be going to the front again soon finally galvanised Metzger into action. On that same morning, he slipped out of the Battalion Office and instead of going for his second breakfast of a beer and a gin, he hurried to County Leader Schmeer's headquarters.

Schmeer's secretary, a hard-faced bitch who had plenty of wood stacked in front of her door, as he couldn't help noticing, shook her head when he asked to see her boss.

"The County Leader is a very busy man. One can't just see him like that."

"I can," Metzger snapped, made bold by his knowledge and his sense of urgency. "Tell him it's damned important."

She sniffed, but did as he asked, swishing out with an arse on her like a ten dollar horse. She seemed to be away a long time, leaving him with a baggy-eyed bust of the Iron Chancellor; a poster of the Führer sitting on a white horse, dressed in medieval armour and carrying a swastika banner; and a picture of a little boy urinating into a pool with beneath the old caption, "Don't drink water – it's bad for you."

Finally, the secretary with the big arse returned.

"The County Leader will give you five minutes now," she said.

"And I'll give him fifty years, if he's not shitty well careful," Metzger grunted as he elbowed his way past her.

Inside the inner office, he snapped to attention and bellowed, "Heil Hitler, County Leader!"

"Heil Hitler," Schmeer said wearily, barely raising his hand. "Not so loud, Metzger, if you please. I was on the piss last night. Too much beer – and the other."

Metzger's grim look did not relax. "I'm not surprised, County Leader. You like your little parties, don't you. Up the cups – cheers New Year, the night's going to be cold!"

Schmeer looked up at Metzger's big, angry face in bewilderment.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Metzger. Haven't you got all your cups in your cupboard or something?"

"Oh, yes, Mr County Leader. I'm all right in the head. It's your head you should worry about – you and your girlfriend's named Sarah."

"Sarah who?"

"Don't try to take me on your arm," Metzger snapped angrily. "I saw you with that Yiddish whore the other night."

"Oh that," Schmeer said easily.

"Yes, that! What do you think the Gestapo would say if they knew that a senior member of the Party was having sexual intercourse with a Jewess!"

"If you only knew what the Gestapo did in this town, Metzger,"

Schmeer sneered, completely unmoved.

Metzger ignored the comment. "While men like me are at the front," he threw a contemptuous glance at Schmeer's War Service Cross Second Class, "you base stallions interfere with our women and not only that you commit racial impurity with Jewesses."

A light dawned in Schmeer's reddened eyes. "So that's it, Metzger. You think me and your Lore," he didn't complete the sentence, but his thumb thrust obscenely between his two middle fingers made his meaning quite clear.

"Yes, I sodding well do and I intend to stop it."

Schmeer tugged the end of his long nose. "Not that I wouldn't have minded, Metzger. Your Lore's got a fine pair of lungs on her. All that meat and no potatoes," he chuckled. "That's what we say in East Westphalia." He sighed. "But I'm afraid a better man than me was there first, Metzger."

"What?" Metzger exploded. "What do you mean?"

"What I say. Someone else was getting a piece of it before I got to know your Lore."

"Who?" roared Metzger.

"That little fellow in your house. Haven't you ever noticed the way his shoulders are bent. That's always a sign a man's got plenty of meat in his breeches."

"Who?"

"Who?" echoed Schmeer, his fat face one huge malicious grin. "Can't you see what's going on right under your big nose?"

"Who?" Metzger yelled, his face crimson, the veins standing out at his temples.

"That little spaghetti-eater, of course."

"Mario?"

"That's right, that's him."

***

The bedsprings were going like overheated pistons as he flung open the door and started pelting up the stairs two at a time; and he didn't need to be told that Lore was not changing the sheets.

"Great crap on the Christmas Tree," he roared to no one in particular. "Thank God, I've not got my duty pistol with me. I'd shoot both of the

fornicating bastards!"

He flung open the door of his flat. He could see right through the place into the bedroom and what he saw was worse than he could ever have imagined.

Lore was on her back, her plump legs stuck in the air, the sweat pouring off her naked flesh, her mouth like that of a dying fish gasping for air, while the undersized muscular, dark-skinned spaghetti eater jumped up and down on top of her soft white body, as if he were trying to pump her full of gas with the thing that he had stuck into her dark cavity. And the way Lore's eye were rolling crazily under her disarranged hair there was plenty of it too.

"You bitch!" he exploded. "You shitty fornicating bitch!"

Mario started. He swung a look behind him and his dark face went a shade of green. "Lore," he cried in alarm and raised his upper body from her. "It's him – your man!"

"Shut up," she gasped in ecstasy and pulled him down on her again. "It's lovely, my little cheetah. More!"

"More – I'll give you fucking well more!" Metzger yelled, beside himself with rage, as she clung to Mario, her legs wrapped round his back while he writhed desperately to free himself.

With a heave he pulled himself off her plump white body. Slowly she opened her eyes and stared up stupidly at her husband's crimson enraged face.

"You," she breathed.

"Who did you shitting well expect – bloody Father Christmas!"

He doubled up his big fist and prepared to smash it in her face. But he never completed the action. From down below came the honking of a car horn and an urgent impatient official voice shouted up the stairs.

"Sergeant Metzger – alert, alert! Report to the barracks at once! We march – we march."

BOOK 2 – OPERATION CITADEL

"It's been an excellent day. Obviously we caught the Popovs with their knickers down."

Major Geier to Capt. von Dodenburg. July 5th, 1943.

CHAPTER 8

"What a sodding awful time of day to go and get yourself killed," Schulze grumbled, staring at the silent endless steppe in front of them. "Midday in the month of July. At least it's cool in a dawn attack."

Von Dodenburg crouched next to him in the parched yellow Russian grass, pushed back his helmet, wiped the sweat off his brow and said, "My dear thick Schulze. The Popovs are accustomed to us attacking at dawn. This time we're doing it at late afternoon, because we want to catch them with their Soviet knickers down."

"I've got to see that first, sir," Schulze persisted.

"You will – never fear." Von Dodenburg cast a glance behind into the hollow to check if his company was still alert in spite of the heavy oppressive summer. They were, despite the Russian sun beating remorselessly down on the Tigers, quivering in blue burning waves over the metal. But the faint wind had dropped now and the flies and sand fleas were at work again. The men of Wotan scratched their bodies with sullen angry persistence.

Von Dodenburg prevented himself from beginning to scratch his own infested body by an effort of will and glanced yet once again at his big issue watch. But the Vulture beat him to it.

"Thirteen fifty," he rasped and rose to his feet, riding crop – his only weapon – held firmly in his little hand. Von Dodenburg joined him. If the Popovs spotted them, they would assume that the two Germans were on some sort of reconnaissance mission, he told himself. They would not suspect that the best part of two elite divisions were massed by the long line of ridges.

But there was no sign of the Russians in their line of fortified hedgehogs some eight hundred metres away.

"Sleeping off their midday meal," von Dodenburg observed, "Like any self-respecting member of the great working masses should."

"Recovering more likely from that cheap vodka they're always drinking, von Dodenburg."

"All the same, it looks good sir," von Dodenburg said, covering the immense plain with his binoculars and not seeing a sign of movement save for a thin column of blue smoke in the far distance.

"I think we've caught them this time on the hop."

"Yes, I agree. I have a feeling that we're going to pull it off without too much trouble. Even that sergeant who runs the division" – he was referring to Dietrich as von Dodenburg knew – "can't make a balls up of this one."

"Let us pray you're right, sir," von Dodenburg said with sudden fervour. "The whole future of the Reich depends on success at Kursk."

The Vulture sniffed and tugged at the end of his monstrous nose which had been burned a salmon pink by the hot Russian sun. "Yes, and my chances of getting a regiment too, it must be remembered, my dear von Dodenburg."

The younger officer opened his mouth to protest at such cynicism when it was obvious that Operation Citadel would be the decisive campaign of the whole long bloody Russian war, but the Vulture did not give him the opportunity to do so. He tugged his officer's whistle from his jacket and blew a shrill blast on it.

The men waiting below reacted immediately, as if they were only too eager to get started. While von Dodenburg doubled back to his company, Schulze at his heels, the panzer grenadiers started to slide into their combat packs, slinging their machine pistols over their chests. NCOs began to hand out extra stick grenades, which were seized eagerly as if they were ice cream cones. Behind them the tankers clambered up the sides of the steel monsters and swung themselves easily into the hatches. Here and there the more nervous urinated for the umpteenth time against the Tigers, while the drivers made their usual comment, "What do you think this is – a sodding St Pauli piss-corner or something?" Schulze stuck a last piece of the special combat-issue chocolate into his big mouth and chewing mightily, he strolled towards von Dodenburg's command tank, as if they were about to set off on some routine mission and not on an attack against the greatest mass fortification system in history.

"First Company, ready – sir!" von Dodenburg yelled above the noise, raising his hand high into the air.

The Vulture touched his riding crop to his helmet in acknowledgement.

"Second Company ready – sir!" Schwarz yelled.

And so it went on. The Vulture took one last look at their tough confident young faces, as if he were seeing them for the very first time.

"Start up!" he yelled.

The drivers pressed their starter buttons as one. Everywhere there were thick, asthmatic coughs. Thin smoke began to stream out of the Tigers' exhausts. With a roar the first engine burst into life. And the next. Suddenly

the still summer afternoon was hideous with the noise. Hastily the panzer grenadiers clambered onto the tanks like a crowd of school kids boarding an excursion bus scared of being left behind.

***

On the stroke of two there was an earth shaking roar behind them which drowned the noise of the tanks into insignificance. With a hoarse exultant scream, the whole weight of the SS Panzer Corps artillery sped over their heads to tear into the Soviet first line, bursting with a mighty antiphonal crash. As they rumbled to the start-line just below the brow of the rise, the thunder of the guns continued. Flight after flight of shells streamed over their heads in vicious anger. Their first red-hot sighing became a scream – a monstrous baleful scream. The scream rose in fury, elemental yet controlled. Before them the first Soviet line disappeared in smoke, the clouds rising straight into the still air.

The heavy artillery moved on to the second line. Now the six-barrelled rocket-mortars took over. From their positions two hundred metres behind the Wotan Battalion, the gunners pressed the buttons that activated the electric firing mechanism. There was the sound of someone hitting the bass notes on a piano. It was followed by a grating noise – like a diamond being run across glass. Suddenly the air above them was full of clusters of heavy canopies. With tremendous crashes they landed among the hedgehogs. This was it. The mortar men would keep any surviving Soviet in his hole until the tanks with their loads of crouching panzer grenadiers were among the hedgehogs, ready to mop up.

"Roll 'em!" the Vulture's voice rasped metallicaly over the radio.

Automatically von Dodenburg pressed both his radio and intercom buttons.

"Forward – first company," he commanded. "Gunners prepare to fire smoke once the barrage lifts!" As he pulled the turret flap and pulled the periscope towards him, he could hear the other company commanders rapping out the same orders.

Schulze, who had taken over from the driver for the first attack, let out his clutch. The Tiger lumbered forward. The next instant it had breasted the rise, showering the tanks behind it with rubble and dust.

Von Dodenburg sucked in his breath and felt as if something had

suddenly scorched his tonsils. The Popov first line was on fire. Angry blue flames licked up everywhere among the wall of dust. But still the deadly rockets kept striking the hedgehogs. *Surely*, he told himself, *no one could live in that hell!*

But they could. A zinc-like light bared itself to his right front. A wild tearing struck the air. Like the sound of a huge piece of canvas being ripped apart, the first Soviet shell zipped by his Tiger. Suddenly his right ear seemed to go deaf. Angrily he banged his right earphone with the flat of his hand.

"Get ready for smoke, gunner," he ordered the gunner hunched into his scope, his own voice sounding strangely distorted. "The Ivans are reacting."

"Sir!" the gunner snapped, his free hand cranking the turret with its long hooded gun from left to right, ready to fire in an instant, if a hostile appeared.

Suddenly von Dodenburg spotted the first T-34, emerging from the smoke.

"Popovs!" he yelled over the radio, warning the rest of the company. "Gunner – cannon traverse right – two o'clock... on!"

Hastily the gunner swung the 88 round. "On!"

Von Dodenburg took a quick look through the periscope. The T-34 was neatly outlined against the Cross-wires of the sight. "Fire!" he yelled.

The gunner squeezed the firing bar. Automatically von Dodenburg opened his mouth against the blast. The great tank shuddered and reared back on its rear sprockets. Acrid yellow smoke filled the turret. The blast whipped against von Dodenburg's face and next instant the breech opened and the smoking yellow cartridge case came clattering onto the deck. With his left hand he loaded a fresh round and with his right pressed the smoke-extractor.

"Fire again – brew the bastard up!" he yelled, as the smoke cleared to reveal the T-34 had stopped.

Slowly, terribly slowly, the Popov gunner was trying to swing his 76-mm round, as if he were already slumped dying over the breech. Von Dodenburg's gunner did not give him a chance. The 88 spoke again. The T-34 reared up like a live thing. Its right track flapped out behind it. Suddenly the turret lurched forward and its gun sunk, as if it were an animal whose head had been severed.

"Stop firing!" von Dodenburg yelled, eager not to waste any more precious ammunition on the T-34.

But Schwarz's voice screamed over the radio to his own gunner. "Hit

him – hit him again – I want to see the Soviet bastard burn!"

To von Dodenburg's right there was the dry flat bark of an 88. The shell struck the crippled T-34 squarely in its fuel tank. It jetted orange flame, surrounded by thick black oily smoke. Still no crew appeared.

But Schwarz was not to be cheated of his prey. "Keep on that machine gun," von Dodenburg heard him command against the crackling background of the static.

A small dark figure appeared in the cupola. For a moment he hesitated, the blue flames licking up about him everywhere. Then he made up his mind. He toppled into the dusty grass and rolling frantically, tried to extinguish the flames. Schwarz did not give him a chance.

"Gunner," he ordered eagerly. "Spandau! Ivan near tank – fire!"

Schwarz's gunner must have hesitated, for von Dodenburg heard the officer cry crazily, "I said fire, you shitty green-beak you!" The next instant a flat angry burst of tracer zipped across the burning steppe.

The gunner could not miss at that range. The Ivan's spine curved frighteningly, his black-charred hands clawed the air, and he fell back screaming. The gunner's next burst caught the driver fighting his way out of the escape hatch. It took his head off. On the turret, a third crew member flung up his hands in fearful surrender. The plea did not help him. At one hundred metres range, the gunner poured a burst into his defenceless body. It disappeared in a bloody broken welter, as if someone had just thrust it into a mincing machine.

At the driving controls the big Hamburger Schulze gulped and said thickly, "Well, I'll crap in my hat! We're really getting off to a good start, ain't we, sir?"

Von Dodenburg did not reply, but as they rattled by the burning T-34 and its slaughtered young crew, he looked away.

As soon as the rocket barrage ended, the Russians reacted quickly. Salvo after salvo – ragged though they were, as if the Russian gunners had been caught off guard – rained down on the advancing battalion. Almost immediately, the terrifying Soviet rocket-mortars – the *Stalin Organs* – joined in. But their aim was wild and they concentrated on plastering the empty positions which the Wotan had just left.

"Smoke!" von Dodenburg yelled urgently. "For Chrissake – smoke everybody!"

The gunners needed no urging. The first Soviet line was still two

hundred metres away and they were completely exposed now. Quickly they fired their smoke dischargers. The black containers soared clumsily into the air. They exploded almost immediately, throwing a thick white stream of smoke ahead of the ragged line of tanks. In a matter of seconds the Wotan was wreathed in a dense mist.

Frustrated of their prey, the Soviet gunners intensified their fire, knowing they must stop the Tigers before they got into the first line. The air filled with the hysterical screams of the Stalin Organs. From the rear the heavies crumped throatily, over and over again. And as the distance between the attackers and defenders narrowed, the Russians began to take a toll of the Tigers. Suddenly the radio began reporting their casualties on all sides.

"Two MGs bothering me from left flank – all my Panzer Grenadiers hit. Like a skating rink with blood up on the deck" ... "Track gone, I'm sitting out here like a spare penis at a wedding. Need protection urgently." ... "Engine damaged. Can't see a hand in front of me for fumes. Can I bail out?"

Then suddenly they had burst through their own smoke screen and with the Soviet barrage still hitting the ground behind them harmlessly, they were only one hundred metres from the enemy line.

The ground was pitted everywhere with huge brown holes. The few trees there were, were stripped white of their bark, their boughs hanging down like shattered limbs. But there were still Soviet troops alive and willing to fight among the shattered wreckage of the front line. Almost immediately the signal flares hushed into the burning air everywhere. The Soviet machine guns opened up angrily. Lead pattered against the Tigers' metal sides like heavy summer rain. But there was no stopping them now.

The 1st Company's flame-thrower tank darted out its deadly tongue. Flame licked its way around the first bunker. The paint on its wall bubbled suddenly like heated toffee. Its machine gun stopped firing. Two T-34s came rumbling frantically towards them. In their haste and fear they crashed into each other. The next instant a luck shot from the flank whacked into them and went through both. Nobody bailed out.

"Spread out – First Company, for God's sake spread out!" von Dodenburg yelled desperately over the radio.

Not a moment too soon. A Soviet 57-mm, concealed behind what looked like a barn, opened up at seventy-five metres range. Von Dodenburg could actually see the glowing white AP3 shell heading towards them, gaining speed every second.

"Gunner – target two –"

The crump of the tank's 88 crashed into his words. The gunner had seen the anti-tank gun before he had. The 57-mm disappeared in a ball of ugly red and yellow flame, its crew dark pieces of flotsam flying through the air. Below them, Schulze wrenched at the steering rods. The Tiger swung round violently, sending a surprised von Dodenburg careening against the hull. His mouth filled with salt-tasting blood. But he had no time for his cut face. The Soviet shell had missed them. But another T-34 was roaring in out of the smoke, only a matter of fifty metres away.

"Gunner," he cried in an agony of urgent fear. "Three o'clock – Popov tank!"

Schulze, reading von Dodenburg's mind, crashed home the reverse gear. The Tiger thundered out of the way, cutting into a group of Soviet infantrymen carrying a rocket-launcher. They disappeared under the tank's great metal tracks screaming, to be flung out at the other side like pieces of chopped beef. The Tiger crew did not even notice. The T-34's shell whistled past their turret. The 60-ton monster rocked as if it had been made of paper and not steel. The next instant the T-34 shot over the top of the burning bunker, revealing the whole length of its under-armoured belly.

"Gunner! For Chrissake, get him in the knackers!" Schulze yelled from below.

"Now – now," von Dodenburg urged, ready to feed in the next shell. The gunner pressed the pedal. The turret swung round. In the sight, the twin triangles met. The belly of the T-34 blocked out everything else. It seemed to fill the whole world. Peering through his own periscope, von Dodenburg could see every rusty rivet, every mud and oil-stained bolt.

The gunner pulled the firing lever. There was the grate of metal striking metal. Even through the thickness of their own turret armour, their ears rang with the enormous din. The T-34 rose into the air and fell the next instant on its back.

Their Tigers pushed on. With Dodenburg in the lead, the 1st Company rolled over dead and dying Russians, crushing them deep into the very earth, which suddenly began to turn to dusty red with their blood. From the cunningly camouflaged 'readiness bunkers' behind the pillboxes, Ivans in dark-coloured underwear came streaming out, screaming at the tops of their voices. They didn't have a chance. Von Dodenburg's twin Spandaus burst into them at 800 rounds per minute. They fell like crazy nine-pins. Within

seconds they were piled up six deep at the doors of the bunkers. As the first wave rolled by, someone tossed a couple of incendiary grenades into the nearest heap. The Ivans began to burn fiercely, with those still alive struggling vainly to get out of the funeral pyre.

A small T-60 Soviet tank cane careering round a corner. Four 88-mm shells hit it simultaneously. It disappeared, as if it had never even existed. Everywhere now the Ivans were throwing down their weapons and beginning to surrender. But the men of Wotan had no time for prisoners.

"Come on over here, you bastards," von Dodenburg heard a voice cry over the radio – he couldn't identify whose. "We'll flatten you like floor mats!"

Whoever it was, he made good his promise. A stream of machine gun fire poured into the Russians. They scattered panic-stricken. Too late. They went down in their dozens.

They roared on. But von Dodenburg trying to bring some order into his hopelessly snarled-up company knew they weren't through the first line completely yet. Cursing viciously over the radio and repeatedly shouting at members of other companies who were getting into his frequency, he managed to extend his two flanks and prevent the centre group of Tigers from bunching too much. He succeeded just in time. Just as they had cleared the last of the bunkers, leaving behind them a bloody wake of crushed dead and dying Ivans, the smoke dissipated to reveal a fantastic spectacle.

An arrowhead of some twenty T-34s advancing towards them, their headlights blazing, their tracks muffled by the thick dust so that they looked like noiseless spectres. Von Dodenburg pressed his throat mike swiftly.

"Schulze, give me everything you've got!"

Schulze responded at once. He shot the gear lever through the thirty-odd forward gears the Tiger had. The 60-ton monster gathered speed.

"Traverse right," the young SS officer yelled urgently. "We've got to flank the right wing!"

The sweat-soaked gunner, his uniform back a greasy black with perspiration, swung the long gun through an arc, while von Dodenburg tore another shell from the rack in front of him. He pressed the smoke extractor button again. The distance between the two lines of tanks was narrowing now. Behind him he knew that his own Tigers would be forming an arrow formation too, forced by his own manoeuvre to the right of the T-34s. Next to him, the gunner, his eye pressed to the rubber sight, began to call out the

distance.

"Three hundred metres... two hundred metres... one hundred and fifty."

But it was the Soviets who fired first. Suddenly there was a blinding light from the closest T-34. A second later the sound of the explosion erupted into the silence. Blast engulfed them, followed by a breathless suction.

The gunner yelled out as if he had been hit while the Tiger rocked like a ship in a gale at sea as the 76-mm shell swept by them harmlessly. But it was just fear, not pain. In the next instant he pulled the firing lever and their own shell shot out towards the Soviets.

What happened next was a confused mess of muzzle flashes, the scrunch of metal against metal, the shriek of ricochets, and the great whoosh of fuel tanks exploding and another tank dying in a great black funeral pyre of oily smoke. Twice they heard the rapping of death on their turret like the beak of some monstrous raven, as shells careened off it, leaving a faint glowing redness in the yellow darkness as the shell worked its way along the metal before glancing off harmlessly. But in each case their Soviet opponents paid for their temerity, their T-34s being brewed up immediately, spewing their metallic lava towards the burning sky.

How long the tank battle lasted, von Dodenburg never knew. It might have been hours, but it also might only have been minutes. More than once he had been forced to open the turret, risking the danger of some Soviet suicide squad armed with Molotov cocktails, in order to clear the cupola of the yellow acrid fumes; and each time as he risked a glance about him all he could see was dying tanks – German and Russian – everywhere.

And then suddenly the fight went out of what was left of the Russians. Von Dodenburg caught a glimpse of the Soviet regimental commander as he tried to rally his wavering force with his little signal flags. But a lucky Spandau burst ripped out his chest and as he slumped dead over the red star decorating his turret, his men panicked.

The T- 34 drivers spun their vehicles round in their tracks. A couple barely missed crashing into each other in their panic-stricken haste. Everywhere the Germans cheered – von Dodenburg could hear them over the crackling radio. Swiftly they started to plaster the retreating T-34s. Now they were easy meat, their under-armoured engines clearly exposed. But their radio link must have been still functioning. For just as the men of Wotan had begun ranging in, the Stalin Organs to the rear opened up again and plastered the battlefield with smoke and high explosion.

Hastily von Dodenburg pressed his throat mike. "All right," he yelled, "retire – retire!"

"A German soldier never gives up ground," an unknown young voice cried angrily over the radio.

"You'll be telling me next you believe in the stork and Father Christmas, you silly young shit!" It was Schulze, shouting into the intercom in his thick waterfront accent. "Get yer arse out of here before the Popovs cut off yer sodding, dumb eggs – with a blunt penknife!"

Suiting his own actions to his words, he spun the sixty ton monster round and sent it clattering back the way it had come. Behind him the survivors of the 1st Company did the same. The first day of the great new offensive was over.

***

Schwarz's Second Company was shooting the few Ivan prisoners when the 1st Company rattled to a stop among the Soviet hedgehogs. It was all very scientific and routine. Occasionally one of the shaven-headed teenage Siberians whimpered and refused to move forward towards the liquidation squad, made up of Schwarz, his bare arms bloodied to the elbows, and a couple of his senior NCOs. A rifle butt between the shoulders or crashed against the back of his shaven skull soon persuaded the man to move forward. But mostly they accepted their fate impassively, no emotion showing on their flat yellow faces, as the liquidators placed their Walthers behind the Siberians' right ears and blew them into a Soviet paradise.

All the same von Dodenburg did not like the look of the pile of corpses stacked awkwardly by Schwarz's command Tiger, their limbs thrust out extravagantly. He looked the other way as he marched up to a waiting Vulture, clicked his heels together and reported in the parade ground style the CO expected from his officers even in the middle of a battlefield.

"Three vehicles completely knocked out, two suitable for recovery. Casualties – ten officers and men killed, fifteen wounded!"

The Vulture touched his overlarge cap with his riding crop. "Good, von Dodenburg. Not bad at all." He took the yonger man and steered him away from where Schwarz was about to place his bloodied pistol against an impassive-faced Siberian's skull yet again. "Let's get away from here. We've had enough noise for this day – and besides those damned Soviets are lousy

anyway. I'd hate to get their lice on me."

"Yessir."

Obediently von Dodenburg walked along beside his CO, automatically stepping over the Soviet dead sprawled out in the ruins or skirting a new shell crater, while the Vulture put him in the picture.

"It's been an excellent day. Obviously we caught the Popovs with their knickers down. Apparently they thought the main attack would come from the North – from Colonel-General Model, according to that Sergeant who controls our destiny. Kraemer was on the radio-phone to me a quarter of an hour ago. We've penetrated the 52nd Guards Rifle Brigade or Division, we don't know which yet. You know how slow Gehlen's Intelligence is."

Dodenburg didn't, but he nodded his agreement, as if he did. He stepped over a Popov whose face had been burned completely away, leaving a black congealed mass, streaked with dried blood and two scarlet pools where his eyes had once been.

"My guess is that we've split the Sixth Guards Army and that Prokhorovka will fall like a ripe apple tomorrow."

Despite his utter weariness, von Dodenburg's face beamed beneath its oily mask. "That's really good news," he said enthusiastically. "But what about Kempf's detachments?"

The Vulture stared at the burping plain, littered with crippled tanks now silhouetted stark black against the blood-red ball of the setting sun.

"They're not providing the flank coverage Dietrich anticipated they would. After all they do not belong to the elite of the Armed SS, do they?"

Von Dodenburg dismissed the Vulture's underlying cynicism. "Oh, let the damn flanks take care of themselves, sir. We've always done it before, why should we worry now?" He forced a tired laugh. "The Wotan will move so fast that the Popovs, won't be able to find our flanks."

The Vulture grinned faintly at the younger man's uninhibited enthusiasm. He raised his shoulders wearily. "I'm sure you're right, von Dodenburg. Very well, see your men are bedded down soon. We shall move out at dawn, push through the village of Pokrovka and go hell-for-leather for Prokhorovka –"

He broke off suddenly. To their front a small group of men from the tank recovery section were using a foot pump to clean out the inside of a shot-up Tiger. Up to now a stream of pink liquid had been spurting out of the drainage holes – blood mixed with water. But for some reason there was a

blockage and pump as they would, no further liquid came out. Casually Vulture, followed by an utterly weary von Dodenburg, went over to the recovery crew.

"What's the matter, corporal?" the CO asked the sweating corporal at the pump.

"The sod won't flush, sir," he gasped and stopped his efforts. In spite of the blessed coolness of the evening, the sweat was still pouring from his naked chest.

"You've got a blockage then, haven't you. Why don't you go inside and find it?"

"Well, sir." Suddenly the skinny bare-chested corporal was embarrassed. "She took a direct hit with a 76-mm." He indicated the gleaming metallic hole neatly skewered through the Tiger's turret. "The crew was all dead when we got the pieces out and we sort of–"

"You're scared, aren't you?" the Vulture broke into his lame explanation. "That's it, isn't it?" Impatiently the Vulture pushed him to one side and swung himself on the blackened turret. "I want this vehicle back in action by dawn," he said looking down at the crew. "I've got no time for your petty fears."

And with that he clambered inside the cupola. For a few minutes they could hear him rummaging around in the dark charred chaos inside. Suddenly the blood-and-water mixture started to run again from the drainage holes.

The Vulture reappeared at the turret, his enormous nose wrinkled up, obviously disgusted by the stench of the tank's interior. He held up one hand. Hanging from it by the hair was a head. With a sudden hot spasm of nausea, von Dodenburg recognised it. It was that of Corporal Dehn of his own Company.

"This was the thing blocking the main hole," the Vulture said in completely normal tone. Almost casually he tossed the head aside. The recovery crew ducked hastily as the gruesome thing sailed by them. The Vulture stepped down, dusting his bloodied hands on his breeches. "Now get on with it. We've got exactly seven more hours till dawn."

The recovery crew began pumping again as if their very lives depended on it, while behind them in the dust the sightless eyes of Corporal Dehn's skull stared into a darkening sky.

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Thirty odd kilometres from where the recovery crew hosed out the damaged Tiger that night, the squat, bald representative of the Soviet Military Council faced Lieutenant General Katukov and his staff in their underground bunker. The Commander of the Soviet First Tank Army had just ordered that two regiments of his assault guns, drawn from his reserves of 1,300 armoured vehicles, should go to the aid of the badly hit Sixth Guards Army. Now he wondered what the little civilian politico, disguised as a major general in the Red Army, would want from him next.

But surprisingly enough the politico wanted nothing else. He let his cunning peasant eyes run round the grave faces of the assembled staff officers.

"The next two or three days will be terrible, comrades," he said slowly, warningly. "Either we hold, or the Germans will take Kursk. They are putting everything on one card." He raised his pudgy forefinger in a gesture that the whole world would come to know and fear one day. "It's a matter of life or death for them. We must take care to see that they break their necks." Major General Nikita Khrushchev, one day to be dictator of all Russia, chuckled throatily, the jowls of his broad face wobbling as he did so.

Suddenly he raised his right knee and snapped his powerful hands across it. "Just like that, comrades," he growled, not taking his eyes from their faces. "That is how we will deal with the Fritzes. Understand?"

Again he chuckled, but there was no humour in his light blue eyes. In spite of the warmth of the underground bunker the staff officers of the First Tank Army shivered and told themselves they would not like to be in the Fritzes' shoes on the morrow.

CHAPTER 9

The advance to the village of Pokrovka was a walk-over – not much different from a pre-war road march, von Dodenburg couldn't help thinking – interrupted only by Popov dive-bombing attacks and occasional snipers. But the Sturmoviks were rattled and inaccurate, and the heart seemed to have gone out of the snipers, usually the elite of the Red Army. They surrendered as soon as they had claimed their first unsuspecting victim and Wotan's special anti-sniper squad went into action, accepting their inevitable fate without much fight. Their camouflaged bodies, their faces painted a sickly light green, hung from the trees on both sides of the dusty white road, marking Wotan's advance.

The only real problem that morning was the heat, with the panzer grenadiers, forced to march because their half-tracks had been knocked out the previous day, dropping like flies. All along the route chain dogs forced the scared peasants out with buckets of water for the foot-sloggers and they lapped it straight out of the pails like so many parched mongrels. In the end the Vulture sent a dispatch rider on his motorbike ahead of the column to warn each miserable, tumbledown Popov farm to be ready with water for his men, who were now beginning to fall out in the tremendous heat. In one place he even managed to find an antiquated Popov fire-engine and when the limping infantry staggered by, each panzer grenadier was sprayed from head to foot by the bare-footed Popov peasants working the handle as if their miserable lives depended upon it. But within a matter of minutes their black soaked uniforms were beginning to steam as the merciless sun dried them out.

In the tanks, they had at least a faint breeze created by their movement, and in von Dodenburg's in particular, Schulze's series of ribald stories about his pre-war life in Hamburg's great Free Port took their minds off the overwhelming heat.

"It was a good life in them days," he recalled fondly over the intercom, "before that shitty Lesbian talked me into this mob – me with an Old Un who thought the sun shone out of Thaelmann's arsehole! That's the rear end of the old head of the German Communist Party for you shitty greenbeaks. Mind you, you had to pay for your pleasures – even then. I remember when I got

my Full House in 1938. It was just before the Führer decided in his infinite wisdom that we needed a bit of Austrian scenery to make the Third Reich a more attractive place for Ami tourists –"

"Get on with it, Schulze," von Dodenburg interrupted hastily. He knew their intercom was monitored back at Corps and he didn't want Schulze getting in trouble with the Gestapo because of his malicious talk.

"Well, as I was saying," Schulze continued without rancour. "When I got my packet, the medics really give me a working over. Without as much as by-your-leave, they had me skivvies down and some sodding bone-mender was sticking his sausage finger up my rear end – right up. I thought he was trying to push through my guts to the other side.

"You may laugh," Schulze said. "But it wasn't funny. There they were, five or six of them, Professor Doctor this and Doctor Doctor that looking at my joystick, as if it were going to come off in their hands the very moment. I can tell yer, it really put the wind up me. But that wasn't all. One of the bone-menders got this rod. It was as thick as one of Sergeant Metzger's butcher's fingers. Well he got hold of my love tube and–"

But Schulze was not fated to be able to relate the rest of his gory tale. Up ahead the Vulture's command Tiger, leading the column, skidded to a sudden stop, showering the plodding grenadiers on both sides with thick choking white dust. Tank after tank followed suit and it was a few moments before their crews could see the reason for their CO's hasty halt. But once the dust had cleared, the full horror of it was soon apparent. Two figures in blood-stained field-grey were hanging from what looked like shattered telegraph posts, their heads ringed with pieces of twisted barbed wire; and to complete the crucifixion, their dice-beakers had been removed so that the retreating Ivans could stab at their naked feet with their bayonets as they hurried past.

Horrified the tankers and the panzer grenadiers crowded round the two poles, oblivious to the danger from snipers of the Sturmoviks, and stared up at the two victims who wore the armbands of the *Grossdeutschland*.

"God in heaven," someone broke the heavy silence, his voice at breaking point. "Will you look at their flies!"

The crowd of suddenly white-faced men followed the direction of his shaking forefinger. Now they saw what he was pointing at.

"What a piggery!" Sergeant Metzger standing on the deck of the command tank roared, his stupid face crimson with rage and horror. "The

Popovs have cut the poor shits' eggs off!"

At the cry one of the two NCOs crucified on the poles raised his gory head slowly. A hush fell on the assembled troopers who stared at his ruined manhood in transfixed horror. He opened his eyes and croaked, "Ivans NKVD... Caught us yesterday... Commissar ordered." He broke off, his dark eyes looking down at them, full of unbearable pain.

"Holy straw sack!" someone cried hotly. "Did you hear that? The Popov police did that to them. Christ on crutch, don't let me get my paws on one of those bastards. I'll cut his communist eggs off with a broken beer bottle!"

"Yes, you're right, pal," a half hundred voices cried. "That's what the Ivan bastards deserve – their nuts sliced off slowly!"

"Get back to vehicles!" the Vulture's harsh incisive Prussian voice cut into the cries of rage and horror. "I'll deal with this."

The tankers swung round, their eyes narrowed against the white-hot sun, to stare up at the Vulture, his hand clasped on his Walther.

"But sir," someone protested. "What about those poor buggers up there?"

"Leave it to me. Now heaven, arse and twine, will you get back to your tanks before the Popovs start knocking us as if we were on a shooting gallery!"

Hastily they fled back to their vehicles, while the Vulture drew his pistol and without appearing to take aim fired once. The NCO from the Grossdeutschland jerked convulsively. His gory head fell down. The Vulture thrust his Walther back in its holster.

"Sergeant Metzger," he snapped, "give them both a burst to make sure. Aim at their faces. I don't like the men following to see the crows pecking at their eyes."

As the column started to move off again, Sergeant Metzger pressed the trigger of his Schmeisser. A burst of 9-mm slugs ripped into the faces of the two crucified men from the *Grossdeutschland*. They disappeared at once. As the tanks rolled by, everyone looked studiously at the other side of the road, while the blood streamed down from the men's faces, drip-dripping into the white dry dust.

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Thirty minutes later they took Pokrovka and the prisoners started to roll in, driven into the village by Schwarz's second Company coming from the left flank and von Dodenburg's First from the right. But this time Wotan's enraged troopers were not content with their usual mechanical execution of their Ivan POWs. They wanted the Popovs to suffer a long time just like the two men on the telegraph poles had suffered.

A group of shaken, filthy young eighteen-year-olds from a Moscow Guards Battalion were driven into the village's shabby onion-towered wooden church, whose peeling blue-and-gold baroque ornaments looked as if they had not been painted since the days of the Czar. Then the place was set alight. As soon as the flame-throwing tank, which did the job, had backed off, the 2nd Company under Schwarz hurried forward to watch for any attempt to break out and gloat over the piteous cries for mercy and aid which came from the church as soon as the flames really began to take hold.

While the 2nd Company was thus occupied, a group from the 3rd drove a group of Siberians into the dusty white village square and set about them with their entrenching tools, cleaving their shaven skulls as if they were prime Soviet melons.

But worse was still to come. A party under Metzger was searching the wrecked village for diesel to replenish their half-empty tanks. As always in such cases they checked the place's collective farm first and it was there that they found the chain dog.

His mutilated body had been tossed on a manure heap after they had finished with him. The hands had been hacked off, the eyes had gone too, but that was nothing to what the unknown torturers had done to the military policeman's anus. They had thrust the silver plate – which the chain dogs wore round their necks and gave them their army nickname – up the orifice sideways, leaving the silver chain dangling purposelessly from it.

"Oh my God!" a young blonde soldier next to Metzger gasped and before he could cover his mouth, the vomit started to shoot from between his lips in hot grunts and gasps.

The news flashed from soldier to soldier. Despite the Vulture's frantic attempt to maintain discipline, the men of the Wotan Battalion went wild. Running from cellar to cellar, they drove the civilians out screaming at them like crazy men, the froth bubbling at their lips. Who gave the order, no one ever discovered. But the lime-caked boards covering the great cesspool had been torn off and they were thrusting the civilians into the evil green-yellow

mess. Men, women and children – they kicked them into it, whacking them across their slimy heads when they refused to drown straight away. One old man with a great white Cossack moustache simply would not go under and half a dozen of them, screaming and cursing, beat his tough old wrinkled face into pulp before he finally sank below the stinking mess of faeces.

Then they discovered the Commissar hiding behind the sacks of grain in the barn at the back of the collective farm. Half a dozen dragged him out, his pudgy hands raised above his dark curly hair, clearly revealing the gold star of the political officer on his sleeve. "Don't shoot... don't shoot," he pleaded in a thick, but recognisable German.

"You're an Issy, aren't you?" someone yelled, the words in German finally penetrating his crazed brain, "Come on –out with it!"

"No, no," the fat fleshy Russian stammered hastily, as they pushed him towards the bubbling cesspool with the old man's hand still protruding from it. "No, no, I learned it at school. At school, you understand?"

"Go on," a dozen voices jeered. "You're an Able all right. Come on, you Ivan bastard – admit it!"

"Why don't yer take his breeches down," someone suggested. "They've all had their tails docked. Then you can tell."

"Yeah, yeah," they agreed. "Get his breeches down!"

A dozen hands grabbed at his breeches and ripped them down. The Commissar's underpants – silk – followed. A second later he was standing there with pants hanging down over his well-polished, hand-made riding boots.

"Well," a heavy-set corporal growled, "let's see if he's an Issy. Come on, let's have a look at his shitty tail!"

A sweating panzer grenadier, one side of his face covered in blood, lifted up the struggling commissar's shirt with his bayonet. He whistled through his front teeth at what his move revealed. "Look at that asparagus Tarzan," he said. "He's had his tail docked by the senior Issy all right... With a blunt razor blade by the looks of it."

"No, no," the Commissar yelled frantically, his German improving by the second. "It was an operation! I had to have it done for medical reasons –"

The heavy-set corporal slapped him hard across the face and the babble of protests stopped abruptly. "Listen Issy, we know what you and your terrorists did to that chain dog. Chopped off his flippers. Peepers out and then if that ain't bad enough, you stick his badge up his arse." He shook his head in

bewilderment. "How can you do things like that?"

"But it wasn't me!"

"Yeah, not you," they sneered. "Not now that we've got you with yer shitty knickers down. But it'd be different if you were getting a medal from that damn novelist Ehrenburg now, wouldn't it?"

"But–"

Again the big corporal hit him across the face. The Commissar staggered back, spitting out blood and teeth, his dark eyes wide and staring with shock.

For a moment there was silence, broken only by the Russian's whimpering and the heavy enraged breathing of the circle of young flushed SS men all around him.

"All right, Issy," the corporal said slowly and deliberately, as if he had just made up his mind. "Now we're gonna make that little Jewish tail of yours a bit shorter still."

"What – what," the other man stuttered, not quite understanding the Army slang in German.

The query froze on his lips as the corporal brought out a penknife from his back pocket. It was the kind used by old soldiers to chop up the issue plug tobacco they smoked in their little shag pipes. Almost casually he slipped open the blade and tested its sharpness with a practised thumb movement. The Commissar watched him in frozen terror.

"Get him on the ground," the corporal said softly, all anger apparently gone from his voice. "And hold him tight."

A dozen hands threw the commissar to the dusty scuffed ground and held him there while he stared up at his torturer with dark eyes filled with fear and loathing. But now he did not attempt to protest any more. It was as if he had accepted his fate already.

The corporal bent over him with the knife and flapped back his shirt tail to reveal again the limp piece of dark flesh against the soft whiteness of the well-fed belly. He took a deep breath and prepared to cut. But another hand seized the knife.

"Give me that," an authoritative voice snapped.

The corporal turned round, a curse on his lips. But it stayed there. Lieutenant Schwarz was staring down at the trapped Jew, murder in his dark eyes.

"This is going to be my job," he said in a thick strange voice, not taking

his gaze off their victim.

"Yessir – of course, sir," the corporal said, backing away and touching his temple significantly to the others behind Schwarz's back. Schwarz fell to his knees in the thick white dust and ran his thumb along the blade of the penknife as the corporal had done, while the Russian stared up at him in silence.

His left hand shot out and seized the Russian's organ gingerly. He tensed. But still the prisoner made no sound. The fear had gone from his pale pudgy face now. It was replaced by hate – sheer naked hate. Schwarz licked his suddenly dry lips and took a firmer hold on the penknife.

Suddenly the prisoner hawked and before Schwarz could dodge he had spat directly in the SS officer's dark face. "German," the Commissar hissed, as if the name alone were a curse, "German pig!"

Schwarz swallowed. Without attempting to wipe away the dripping spittle, he started to saw.

***

Three hours later, SS Assault Battalion Wotan hit the second line of Soviet defence. It stopped them dead.

CHAPTER 10

Against the blood-red disc of the setting sun, the Russian positions were outlined a stark menacing black, their every detail revealed.

"The Popovs must actually have found a general who can think further than his Party membership card," the Vulture said thoughtfully, lowering his glasses and tugging at the end of his monstrous nose. "Whoever he is, he's sited his positions very nicely – very nicely indeed."

Von Dodenburg and Schwarz said nothing. There was no sound save the crackling of the flames still burning in the two Tigers hit that afternoon.

"I don't have to tell you gentlemen," the Vulture continued, "that the Popovs have got any attacker by the short hairs. That stream on the right flank there and the railway embankment on the left – the damn thing must be at least three metres high – would channel any attack into an area of, say, a kilometre. And as you can see, that kilometre is exceedingly well covered by their prepared positions, which are also located on the high ground."

"Give me the order to advance, sir," Schwarz said hotly, his eyes gleaming crazily, "and I'll cut through the Ivans with my Second like a dose of salts."

The Vulture lowered his glasses and looked at him in mock sadness. "My dear young Schwarz! You'd lose half your precious Second before you'd gone two hundred metres. Look at those Popov anti-tank guns dug in over there on the railway embankment. Once you had offered them your flank, they'd pick off your Tigers as if they were on the firing range. One after another."

"So it's the back door then, sir," von Dodenburg said wearily.

The Vulture nodded. "Yes. A frontal attack would be suicidal and a flank attack is impossible." He chuckled cynically. "I had been expecting some act of God. After all the Popovs are atheists and we Germans are fighting a holy war out here. But the Almighty seems to have withdrawn his support of our cause of late. So the back door it will have to be."

Von Dodenburg ignored his CO's cynicism. "The embankment is out, sir. That leaves the river. We could cross it, put in an infantry attack and try to roll up the right flank. Combined with a flank attack by the rest of the Battalion at that point, we could probably pull it off."

"Not could, my dear von Dodenburg, must!"

At his side, Schwarz clicked his heels together formally. "I volunteer the Second for the mission, sir," he rapped.

The Vulture shook his head. "No, Schwarz, not you. But von Dodenburg here. What is left of his company after this afternoon is virtually infantry anyway and you've still got most of your Tigers. Von Dodenburg will do it and you will launch the flank attack."

"But Sir –"

The Vulture ignored his protests, and in five minutes the attack was worked out in the tradition of the Armed SS, which had gained a reputation in Russia these last few years for swift, if costly actions.

"Attack at zero three hundred hours as soon as you hear the diversionary attack on the embankment put in by the Third," the Vulture concluded. "And the best of luck von Dodenburg."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now I suggest you get some sleep before you attempt to get across that stream."

***

But despite his weariness, there was no sleep for von Dodenburg that evening, nor for the rest of his Company. Instead he sat next to Schulze lazily watching the men heating cans of Old Man over the petrol fires, their faces hollowed out and made old and worn by the flickering blue flames. All was silent save for the low murmur of the troopers' conversation and the dry pistol cracks from Schwarz's lines. As usual the Second was shooting prisoners again. Schulze lit another of the long-stemmed black tobacco Russian cigarettes, exhaled a thin stream of evil-smelling smoke and coughed thickly. He pulled a wry face.

"Christ this *mahorka*," he cursed softly. "Makes yer mouth taste like a gorilla's armpit!"

Von Dodenburg laughed. "Should be glad you've got them. Over in the Third they're down to smoking tea leaves in pieces torn from the Schwarze Korps."

"Ugh," Schulze said. "That'd be enough to put anybody off these cancer sticks for good." But the usual broad grin was absent from his tough waterfront face.

"What's up, Schulze?" von Dodenburg asked. "You're looking like the celebrated pregnant duck at the moment."

Schulze did not answer immediately. Instead he stared at a trooper who was mixing a fresh mixture of dirt and petrol to the consistency of porridge before lighting it to heat another can of the Old Man.

"It's the future, sir," he said at length, his face suddenly illuminated by the whoosh of the petrol stove igniting. "I hate to sodding well think what it's gonna bring."

"What do you mean?"

Schulze jerked his head in the direction of the Second's lines. "That."

"How?" von Dodenburg queried.

"We can't get away with that kind of shitty carry-on much longer sir." He prodded the SS runes on his collar, sparkling in the blue light of the stove. "Half the world these days is scared shitless as soon as they see these – even in the Reich. And the other half hates our guts so much that all they can think about is arranging for us to look at the potatoes from underneath. We've got too much blood on our hands – Belgium, France and now Popovland again. Everywhere the sods hate us."

"But someone's got to do the job, Schulze," von Dodenburg said seriously. "The Reich is fighting for its survival and we're the Führer's Fire Brigade."

"I know that, sir. I know that. But look what it's made of us. Those troopers who pushed the Popovs in the shit-pit this afternoon were still learning Schiller's crappy poetry at school six months ago – all full of nobility and the sodding German spirit. And that corp over there?" He indicated the heavy-set NCO who had pulled the knife on the Soviet Commissar. "A year ago when he first joined the mob, he used to cry himself to sleep because he thought he'd never make a soldier and because he missed his big-titted Mummy. Look at him now, a killer – a cold-hearted killer. Just like the rest of us."

Von Dodenburg looked at Schulze hotly. "We're not killers, Sergeant Schulze. We are soldiers – the elite of the nation, the best Germany has."

But Schulze was not impressed by von Dodenburg's attempt to pull rank. "We're damned," he said dourly. "You and me, Wotan, the whole sodding SS – all of us, we're damned."

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A twig cracked underfoot.

"Watch yer sodding feet," a dozen voices hissed angrily.

Cautiously von Dodenburg put his right foot into the dark swift-running stream. The current was strong but not too strong. "Hold tight," he whispered and moved in up to his waist. Behind him the men holding the rope tight around him took the strain.

"Here, give it me," Schulze snapped and took hold of it. He was his usual businesslike self again. "Some of you stupid bastards'd lose yer eggs if they weren't sewn up inside a sack, never mind this rope. All right sir, I've got it now. You can go ahead."

Cautiously von Dodenburg began to wade his way across, his machine pistol held above his head. The current started to tug at his feet. Below them he could feel the smooth stones roll and slip. Suddenly the current took away his grip. Instantly Schulze held the strain. But von Dodenburg had been prepared for the effect of the current. With his right hand he began to strike out for the bushes fifty metres or so downstream, while Schulze and the rest played out the rope behind him. A few minutes later he was treading water and then clambering up the muddy bank, trying to make as little noise as possible.

Hurriedly he fixed the line and gave two rapid tugs on it to signal Schulze that he was across. Crouched in the bushes, machine pistol at the alert, he could hear the big NCO propelling himself across without the aid of the rope.

And he wasn't even breathing hard when he dropped at von Dodenburg's side, shaking the water off his pants and pulling on his tunic at the same time.

"Where are they, sir?" he asked softly.

"Can't you smell them?"

Schulze turned his head slightly to one side and sniffed the faint breeze. "Yeah, I can now. The Ivans are pretty damn good at camouflaging themselves, but they can't hide that pong of theirs."

Von Dodenburg nodded. There was an unmistakable odour about the Russian soldier – a compound of black tobacco, their hard yellow washing soap and the garlic sausage to which they were addicted – which always gave them away.

"Over there – fifty metres or more. At two o'clock."

"That little hillock, sir?"

"Yes. That'll be it. They're dug in on the other side of it in their usual way with a look-out behind that central bush more than likely."

For a moment or two they stared at the seemingly innocent rise; then Schulze whispered, "What's the plan?"

In answer, von Dodenburg drew out the soldier's bayonet he had brought with him for this job. Its blade gleamed wickedly in the thin yellow light of summer moon which had just peered from behind the clouds.

"Get you, sir," Schulze said hoarsely. "I'll use my Reeperbahn equaliser." Swiftly he slung his machine pistol and reaching in his pocket, slipped on a set of brass knuckles. He clenched his ham-like fist and spat on them for luck. "They've knocked out more choppers, sir than you've had hot dinners."

"No doubt, Schulze," said von Dodenburg. "But let's get the men over first before you start your disgraceful waterfront tricks."

"Yeah, before them mothers' darlings over there start peeing their pants with fear."

Hastily they brought the rest of the company across and left them crouching in the bushes while Schulze and von Dodenburg advanced cautiously on the first Russian outpost, the only sound their tense breathing and the faint rustle of the yellow grass. As usual the Russian position was so well camouflaged that they had almost bumped into it before they noticed it. Suddenly von Dodenburg's heart gave a leap. A Popov was crouched right in front of him, the top half of his body clad in an earth-coloured smock. For one long moment they just stared at each other. Then the Popov's broad peasant face began to register the fact that the man crouching in the darkness two metres away was an enemy soldier. His mouth opened.

Von Dodenburg did not give him chance to shout. With a great leap he was on him. "Not the helmet," his brain screamed at him. The bayonet will glance off! The throat!" With a crash he hit the Popov. The bayonet bored deep into his neck. There was a sound like air rushing out of a suddenly holed pipe. Together they tumbled to the bottom of the trench. He felt the Russian's body beginning to go limp beneath him. He dug the bayonet in again. Hot blood spurted over his knuckles and ran up his sleeve. Still the Russian did not die.

"Croak, you bastard!" he cursed vehemently and thrust the bayonet home once more.

The sentry's face contorted in agony. A clot of blood shot out of the side of his mouth. His head fell to one side. He was dead. For one long second, von Dodenburg felt absolutely exhausted, his mind an aimless blank. But gradually the sounds of a new danger penetrated his consciousness. He pulled out the blood-stained bayonet and scrambled like a lunatic out of the hole.

Two Popovs were running awkwardly at Schulze, great long bayonets pointed at his belly. Schulze did not move. He waited for them.

"Move it!" von Dodenburg screamed a warning, though he dare not say the words aloud.

When it seemed that the Russians would run Schulze through the guts, he acted. Swerving abruptly to one side, he kicked the first Popov in the crotch and launched a terrible punch at the second one. The first man went down screaming horribly. The other's false teeth – a stainless steel set, which gleamed in the moonlight – bulged suddenly out of his mouth.

"Stop that bastard screaming," Schulze ordered and threw himself on the second man.

Von Dodenburg dived on the Russian writhing on the ground, the vomit spurting up from between his teeth clenched in agony. With one swift movement he drew the razor-sharp bayonet across his exposed throat. For what seemed an age nothing happened. Then, a thick red line appeared along the whole length of the stricken Russian's neck. Von Dodenburg pressed his hand across the man's mouth to prevent him screaming and did it again.

Above him Schulze drew back his fist and smashed it into the other Popov's face. Von Dodenburg could hear his nose-bone snap like a dry twig. Blood spurted out of his smashed nose. Still he did not go down. Schulze hit him again. The Russian's right eye disappeared in a mass of thick blood. But although he was now swaying badly like a very drunken man, he still remained on his feet.

"Go down you shitty Popov bastard," Schulze cursed sotto voce. "Do. you want to die a sodding hero's death or something?"

The Russian muttered something, blood pouring from his terribly mutilated face. While the man on the ground died, von Dodenburg's hand pressed over his mouth so that he wouldn't scream, the young officer watched as Schulze prepared to hit the wildly swaying Russian again.

"Right you brave sod!" Schulze hissed. "Take that!" With all his enormous strength he crashed his metal fist right into the centre of the

Russian's brow.

The Popov shot backwards to hit the ground three metres away. Schulze did not give him a chance to get up again. He threw himself forward. His big hob-nailed dice-beaker crashed down on the man's ruined face. Once, twice. Von Dodenburg could hear the facial bones splinter and crack. Still the Russian tried to get up.

"Christ on a crutch, man!" Schulze cried beside himself with rage and despair. "Do you soddingly well want to live for ever?" With the last of his strength he launched one final kick at the Russian. It caught him at the point of his shattered jaw. His scream of agony died abruptly under the impact of that tremendous blow. His head shot back. Something snapped and he was dead before his head hit the ground.

Five minutes later the storm broke. First there was thunder, as bad as a heavy bombardment with air support from Stukas. Lightning ripped the darkness apart. Then it came down in torrents. Enormous drops started pattering against their steel helmets. Hastily the troopers pulled their camouflaged capes about them and started to plod forward. The ground turned into a thick red mire almost immediately, but it had the advantage of muffling any sound they made as they began to advance towards the main Soviet positions, guided by the agreed-upon signal flares fired from their own lines. Doggedly they slogged their way through the quagmire, the young officer and Schulze in the lead, their machine pistols held at the alert.

"Holy straw sack," some young soldier mumbled just behind von Dodenburg, "just think of being at home in a warm clean bed tonight and able to sleep the clock round–"

"Twice," someone else said next to him, "At least twice."

"Yeah, and then good bean coffee and hot rolls."

"With apricot jam. You've got to have apricot jam with hot rolls."

"And what about a little bit of soft titty too?" Schulze's voice butted into their reverie. "Knock it off, you silly young sods! What do you think this is – a shitty girls' school's outing or something!"

Von Dodenburg smiled thinly to himself in spite of the raindrops trickling down the inside of his jacket. Trust old Schulze for bringing even the greatest dreamer down to earth with a crash.

Suddenly an urgent foreign-sounding voice called through the dripping darkness. "Over here, Fritz – Fritz, can't you hear me?"

The smile vanished from von Dodenburg's wet face. He froze. Behind

him in the pouring rain the company came to a ragged halt.

"Nobody move – nobody answer." Schulze hissed at his side. Carefully he began to raise his Schmeisser, peering into the darkness.

"Fritz – over here," the strange disembodied voice called again. "What's wrong with you Fritz, can't you hear me?"

"Down," von Dodenburg commanded in a tense voice.

The strange voices came from all sides now. "Fritz, here. Fritz, what's wrong... Fritz?"

But the old hands knew the Popov trick. The veterans among them clapped their dirty, muddy paws over the mouths of the recruits to prevent them calling out. A single shot rang out from somewhere to the left. It echoed hollowly through the rain. An age seemed to pass while they searched in vain through the darkness for the enemy. Another shot rang out. And another, from a different direction.

It was a nerve-racking business and von Dodenburg, hugging the mud with the length of his soaked body, breathed a silent prayer of thanks that not one of his men had fired back and betrayed their position. The Popovs were just as puzzled as they were. The sniping continued for some time. Twice slugs sliced the air just above their heads, and once the firing seemed to come from somewhere behind them. Then it stopped as abruptly as it had started, leaving behind an echoing silence.

"Stand fast," von Dodenburg hissed. He knew that this was the worst test of all. If their nerves broke now and they started to move – either forward or backwards – the Popovs would annihilate them. But the First Company held steady.

The minutes passed leadenly. Then they heard a soft movement up ahead to their left. The Popovs came as silently as they could. Their boots would be off and any part of their equipment which might clink would be muffled in rags or removed. But they were coming all right.

Von Dodenburg nudged Schulze. "Can you hear them?"

"Yes! I'll pass the word."

Hastily the alarm ran from mouth to mouth, as the faint sounds grew louder. There seemed a lot of them, and now von Dodenburg could hear them slipping in the mud of the slight incline immediately ahead of them. Carefully he pulled out his only incendiary grenade.

A dark hesitant shape loomed up ten metres away. And another. By the very way they stood, he guessed they did not realise how close they were to

the German positions. The first man raised his hand, as if signalling to the rest to follow him. Other dark squat shapes appeared out of the streaming rain.

"Now!" von Dodenburg screamed and hurled the grenade at the first shape.

It exploded instantly. A fierce spurt of bright white flame shot up the Ivan's body. A wildly contorted, terrified face came into view, and disappeared screaming in the flames. The next instant the vicious volley hit the Russian line. A dozen of them were bowled over, yelling with the shock of it.

And then they were charging the Germans. Almost at once the muddy field became a bloody chaos, with little groups of cursing, screaming men stabbing, shooting, clawing each other in the red morass, skidding from side to side like ice skaters. "Christ, he's stabbed in the guts... I'm stabbed... Stretcher-bearer... I'm shot... The sodding bastards have shot me..." The frenzied frightened agonized cries rose on all sides in Russian and German.

An enormous Ivan, stinking of garlic and black tobacco launched himself at von Dodenburg. The officer let him have a burst in the guts. He flew backwards and sat down in the mud. Von Dodenburg jammed his butt in the man's face. Something snapped and the man toppled backwards. Another trooper stepped on his face, pressing it deep into the mud. An Ivan loomed up out of the streaming rain. He clutched a round-barrelled tommy gun to his side. But von Dodenburg fired first. His arms fanned the air as he fell over, gurgling horribly through his punctured wind pipe.

Then 1st Company's only flame-thrower hissed into action. A long tongue of flame licked the Ivans' front rank. A squat officer with enormous epaulettes screamed as his body went up in flames. The terrible weapon cut the night again. A young Popov was engulfed by the stream of fire. Screaming hideously he rolled down the other side of the slope, his arms and legs flailing madly in his immense agony.

Another followed him like a human catherine wheel. And another. Panic broke out. The Popovs started to throw away their weapons, clawing at each other to get out of the way of that monstrous flame.

And then they had burst through them and were running madly across the soaking steppe into the darkness. By the time the urgent Popov signal flares had begun to hiss into the sky to be followed by the first howls of the Stalin organs on the position they had just held, the survivors of the 1st

Company had vanished into the streaming rain, leaving only their dead and dying behind them.

CHAPTER 11

Like grey Russian timber wolves they sneaked out of the shattered fir forest towards the unsuspecting Popovs. It was now nearly three, time for the diversion. Behind them the angry Russian mortar stonk had died down. It had given way to short nervous bursts of machine gun fire, as if the Russian gunners still thought they were out there somewhere on the soaking steppe.

Von Dodenburg crouched and gave a hand signal. A couple of the veterans hushed forward, unarmed save for the trench knives clasped in their big muddy fists. The Popov sentries did not even move as they tugged back their helmets, pulled hard at the straps to strangle their first surprised cries of alarm and slid the razor-sharp knives between their ribs.

Von Dodenburg signalled again. Bent and at the double, they advanced on the stark outline of M-13 rocket-launchers, which guarded the rear of the Popov positions. A sentry staggered half asleep from between two huge piles of 30-mm rockets. Schulze hit him with the Reeperbahn equalizer. He went down as if he had been pole-axed, the bloody ruin of his mouth full of broken teeth.

"Grenades," von Dodenburg whispered urgently as they crouched next to the unconscious sentry.

A bareheaded giant with two huge sacks of grenades, in addition to the three belts of Spandau ammo slung over his enormous chest, dropped into the mud beside him.

"The cannon," said von Dodenburg. "Time fuse for –" he checked the luminous dial of his issue watch "– exactly five minutes from now."

The gigantic grenadier disappeared into the rain. Von Dodenburg put his hand on the centre of his helmet, the signal for 'to me'. The twenty or so survivors of the 1st Company crowded around him, the raindrops dripping off the rims of their helmets.

"Break up into twos. Check that you've all got grenades. Post yourselves outside the bunkers." He indicated the squat outlines of the dug-in Russian positions below the mortar battery. "As soon as the white flares start coming up from the south-east, you know that the balloon's going up. Then in, double quick and sort the Popovs out. No messing. Grenade through the opening and straight on inside."

"Prisoners?" somebody asked softly.

"Nix! We've got no time for them. Besides we haven't enough men spare to guard them. No, clean the Popovs out and then get yourselves ready for their counter-attack. The whole idea is to hold this position until Lieutenant Schwarz's 2nd Company can reach us. Any questions now?" He stared round their pale blobs of faces under the dripping helmets. "All right, Schulze, you come with me. The rest of you –happy landings!"

"Happy landings, sir," they answered dutifully.

Swiftly they stole away and posted – themselves at the entrances of the Russian bunkers, fingers tensed on their weapons. There was no sound save the snoring of their unsuspecting victims inside and the rat-tat of some ancient Russian machine gun a long way off, chopping away like some dogged woodpecker. Von Dodenburg looked at the luminous dial of his watch. Still two minutes to go. Time seemed to have stopped. He felt the sweat begin to start up all over his body. He freed one hand and then the other from his machine pistol and wiped them dry on his trousers. It was tension that was making him sweat, he knew that. It was always the same at moments like this. He gripped his Schmeisser again and within seconds his hands were slimy with perspiration. He cursed softly to himself and released his right hand.

Suddenly there was a hush. He turned, startled. A flare had sailed into the air, and another. Schulze's big face suddenly shone an unnatural white. For a moment the young officer did not move. He couldn't. He seemed rooted to the spot. Another flare hissed into the dripping sky. The Popov machine gunner quickened his fire. Below them in the bunker, the others began to stir uneasily.

"Now!" he roared suddenly.

Schulze shot forward. With his big boot, he kicked open the door of the bunker. In the same instant, he flung in the stick grenade and slammed the door shut again.

There was a thick muffled crump. A scream rang out. Schulze kicked open the door again and jumped back. Standing splay-legged in the opening, machine pistol tucked into his hip, von Dodenburg poured in a vicious hail of fire. He couldn't miss. The screaming half-dressed Popovs were packed in the entrance, clawing each other frantically in their efforts to get out. A couple of them, bleeding from multiple wounds, their faces blackened from the grenade explosion, staggered out, crying the only German word they knew,

"Comrade... comrade!"

Schulze did not hesitate. He kicked the two of them into the mud and stabbed them to death there in the crimson slush. Von Dodenburg rushed inside, his machine pistol held at the ready. The place stank of unwashed bodies and black tobacco which even the acrid smell of the explosive could not hide. He sprang over shattered bodies, illuminated by the hissing petroleum lamp still functioning on the little wooden table in the centre of the bunker. Suddenly he heard a faint whimpering. He spun round, his nerves going like trip hammers. To his right there was a dark passage leading off the main bunker. Pulling out his last remaining grenade, he ripped out the pin and lobbed it down the dark passage. Quickly he flung himself against the protection of the earth wall. At his feet a Popov groaned and tried to raise himself. As the grenade exploded he kicked the Russian viciously in the face. His head clicked back like that of a wooden puppet, his neck broken neatly.

Von Dodenburg sprang forward, spraying the passage with lead as he ran up it. But it was a waste of precious metal. The only occupants of the big inner chamber, which was obviously a command post, were already dead or dying. One sole Popov, whose stiff board epaulettes bore the golden insignia of a senior colonel, tried to raise himself, a red jet pumping from a severed artery in his throat. Von Dodenburg didn't give him a chance. The Russian fell back, his upper body shattered. Then there was no sound, save for an echoing silence and the soft dribble of the dying Colonel's blood into the dry dust.

Von Dodenburg staggered back against the wall and leaned there, his chest heaving frantically. They'd pulled it off; they'd done it! He felt all energy drain out of him, as if someone had just opened a secret tap. It seemed, as if he would never be able to move again. But a moment later, Schulze came running up the passage, crying out his name in alarm, and in the far distance the German heavies opened up to support Wotan's attack. He pulled himself together.

"Here, Schulze," he cried. "I'm here." Just as Schulze burst into the command post, the first Popov counter-fire hissed viciously over their heads, shaking the whole bunker and von Dodenburg knew the fun and games had started.

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The whole line trembled like a dying animal. Time and time again the rockets crashed down on it, their angry red tails streaking after them, as the Russians tried to knock out what was left of von Dodenburg's company. But the Popovs who had built the positions had done a fine job, as they always did, and although the bunkers rocked alarmingly, nothing but a direct hit could put them out of action. As Schulze roared between salvoes, "I think I'll stay here for the duration, sir. It's safer!"

Von Dodenburg cupped his hands round his mouth, his teeth gleaming against his blackened face, and yelled back. "Rather you than me, Schulze! It's like being in a force twelve gale – my stomach's heaving as if I'm on the high seas!"

But just after Schwarz's first attempt to break through to them failed, the artillery fire slackened and the infantry came in: masses of small men in earth-coloured blouses running forward in packed ranks, crying their usual hurrah. They mowed them down by the hundred, each two-man team working independently, confident of their superiority to these sub-human creatures who sacrificed their precious lives so frivolously. The Popov bodies piled up five deep only twenty metres from their positions, but they stopped them all right; and soon the survivors were streaming back the way they had come, leaving the battlefield to the artillery once more.

Soon the command bunker began to rock once more to the explosion of the rockets and what von Dodenburg took to be 105-mm guns. But now he had recovered his nerve. Peering through the loop-hole at the body-littered battlefield, he yelled, "Schulze, I'll stand watch while you go and see if you can rustle up anything to eat. The cabbage steam is beginning to rise within me."

"Sir," Schulze said, slinging the two Russian sub-machine guns he was using, now that he had run out of ammunition for the Schmeisser. "But I can't promise you much except that boiled mongrel sausage the Ivans eat."

"It sounds like the best Kempinski could provide," von Dodenburg yelled, as Schulze, the born looter, began to rummage among the debris of the command bunker. But the big Hamburger returned with something else beside two hunks of coarse Popov black bread and wedges of bright red sausage balanced on them to be washed down with a fiery mixture of rain water and vodka.

He swallowed a piece of the garlic sausage and casually rolled a coin across the floor to where von Dodenburg squatted with his back against the

trembling earth wall. Curiously the officer, his mouth full of bread and vodka mixture, picked it up and examined it.

"What is it?" he asked after a while. Schulze's reply was drowned by a fresh salvo of rockets. Impatiently he waited till they were finished, while von Dodenburg stared at the dull yellow coin with the Imperial Eagle of Old Russia stamped on one side and the head of an unidentifiable Czar on the other.

"Twenty rouble piece," Schulze yelled finally.

"Oh," the officer answered without too much interest, and was about to roll it across the floor back to Schulze when the Hamburger added:

"In gold – almost pure gold."

Von Dodenburg whistled through his teeth, while Schulze observed his expression, a curious look in his usually frank eyes. "Gold, eh?"

"Yeah, there's enough there to pay the great whore of Buxtehude for a whole week of nooky."

"Is that so?"

"Hm, hm," Schulze took another slug of vodka mixture and wiped the back of his sleeve across his mouth, but he did not take his eyes off von Dodenburg's face.

"All right, Schulze," von Dodenburg bellowed as the Stalin organs started up again, "Pee, or get off the pot. If you've got to tell me something – good, tell me it."

"Back in that other room, we must have killed a real old Russki big shot with that grenade. There wasn't much left of his upper body, but he had enough tin on his chest to make even our beloved CO envious as far as I could make out, his badges of rank made him out to be a major-general."

"Any documents, maps and the like?" von Dodenburg roared.

"I didn't look, Captain. I found this – and that was enough for Mrs Schulze's little boy." He reached inside his tattered, mud-stained tunic and brought out what looked like an old-fashioned money belt. He tossed it towards the officer and it fell heavily into the dust before him. "If you want to count it," he said. "And I did – you'll find there are close on three hundred of them in there."

"Well, you could have a lot of Buxtehude whores for that, Schulze."

"I could, sir, but I don't want the whores. I've still got my good looks and my charm, sir after all. I don't need to buy my tail yet."

"What do you want, then?" von Dodenburg tensed as a 105-mm shell

landed close behind the bunker, showering earth and pebbles on their helmets. "Well, go on – what do you want, man?"

"Out," Schulze snapped laconically, his voice full of determination.

"Out of what."

"Out of this shit, out of the Wotan, out of the SS, out of Germany!"

Von Dodenburg looked at him, his mouth open. "What did you say?"

"You heard me, Herr von Dodenburg! But don't get me wrong. If some sodding Popov knocked me off tomorrow with a nice clean bullet, I wouldn't exactly welcome the event, but I'm not scared of it. What I'm scared shitless about is what is to come. I couldn't stand a Popov camp or any other POW cage. No booze, no dames – no, that's not for me." He shook his head firmly. "And that Marie there in the belt is our way out."

"Our?" von Dodenburg echoed the word stupidly.

"Yeah, I want you to come along with me." Eagerly Schulze explained his plan. How a couple of the coins would buy them a fake evacuation ticket on one of the hospital trains bound for the Reich. There he knew a man down at the docks – "the little bastard's been inside the nick a couple of times and he likes his sauce, but he's the best forger in St Pauli" – who would fake them a couple of civilian ID cards. With these they would make their way into Occupied France and make contact with the Catalan professional smugglers who regularly took refugees across the frontier into Spain.

"From there, well," Schulze shrugged expansively while von Dodenburg stared at him in open-mouthed disbelief, "the world's ours – the Argentine, Brazil, Chile – who cares. As long as there's no war and no SS there." He broke off suddenly. "Well, what do you think, Herr von Dodenburg? It's the only damn way to save our hides before it's too late!"

Von Dodenburg opened and closed his mouth rapidly like a stranded fish gasping for air. "You, you," he stuttered, unable to find the words to express his outrage. "You can't expect me to–"

But he never completed the sentence. The roar of the Stalin organs stopped abruptly to be replaced by the rusty rattle of Tiger tracks. Outside, a well-remembered Prussian voice rasped, "Wotan to me – SS Assault Battalion Wotan rally on me!" The Battalion had finally broken through.

CHAPTER 12

The bloody advance to Kursk went on under the merciless white-hot Russian sun. One day after they had broken through the second line of defence, a fleet of old three-engined Junkers transport planes flew over their positions. Sedately and in perfect formation, despite the Russian flak, they released the great Do 230 gliders they had been towing. Moments later the gliders' monstrous black shadows zoomed in low over the baked steppe to make perfect landings. Before the Russian artillery ranged in on them, the glider pilots evacuated the wood and fabric planes, lying on the ground now like helpless birds.

Men and material poured from them. For the most part they were teenagers straight from the training schools, some of them with only six weeks' basic training behind them. Many of them, too, spoke German with outlandish accents – ethnic Germans from all over occupied Europe, recruited by Reichsführer Himmler's 'body-snatchers' by force or false promises. The material wasn't much better either: patched-up Mark IVs from previous campaigns, armed with outdated short 75 guns, which hadn't been even properly fired in.

But in spite of Sergeant Metzger's disgruntled report to his CO that "two hundred booty Germans and eight toy tanks" were "present and correct", the Vulture was glad to have them. In the last four days the Battalion had lost nearly 50 per cent of its effectives and the new blood was urgently needed.

Twelve hours later, the Third Company, where most of the reinforcements went, was probing the Popov's third line of defence when it swung into a carefully staged Russian trap. Tempted into attacking what looked like a wandering Cossack cavalry battalion, the Third was flanked by a whole brigade of Soviet assault guns, cunningly dug-in hull-down on the high ground to their right. The Popov SU-76s were armed with the inferior 76-mm gun. Under different circumstances the 3rd Company's 88-mm would have made short work of them, but the SU-76s were so well dug-in that they could blast one Tiger after another without a single casualty to themselves. Within thirty minutes the 3rd had ceased to exist. Only two German tanks escaped, one of them commanded by the 3rd's 20-year-old Commanding Officer.

He reported the loss of his company to the Vulture in the prescribed military way, then he excused himself for a moment and walked across to the nearest shattered tree, as if he were going to urinate. Instead he pulled out his duty pistol, placed it against his temple and squeezed the trigger. The bullet shattered his skull, the blood splattering the Vulture's over large riding boots. Calmly the Vulture took out his handkerchief and flicked the blood off while an ashen-faced Metzger stared at him aghast.

"Bury the bloody fool, Metzger," the Vulture rasped, no trace of emotion in his thin Prussian voice, "and see that I sign the recommendation for a bit of tin for him – say, the Iron Cross, second class." He sniffed and peered through his monocle to check if his boots were clean. "That's about all he deserves for losing a useless company like that. If this had been 1940 I would have court-martialled him. All right, Metzger, get the lead out of your arse! Move it!"

***

That same night a long line of trucks from the 8th Panzer Division which was in reserve rolled into their laager. A bewildered company of tankers in their black uniforms dropped into the dust and lined up in front of Geier and his officers. Hurriedly a heavy-set tank captain clicked to attention in front of the Vulture and made his report.

"Captain Stuke, 1st Company, Seventh Battalion and two hundred men, sir!"

The Vulture eyed him with a mirthless smile. Von Dodenburg knew what he was thinking – the Panzer Captain was a typical base stallion, his sole decoration the sport medal in bronze. Finally the Vulture returned the Captain's salute.

"Welcome to SS Assault Battalion Wotan, Stuke," he said.

"SS Assault Battalion Wotan!" the other officer echoed his words stupidly. "But Major, no one told us at HQ that we were to join the Armed SS."

"Well, this must be a pleasant surprise for you, eh! It isn't every day that one gets the opportunity to join an elite formation like the Wotan, is it?"

"Yes, yes, I understand that, Major," Stuke said, his face growing red. "But one needs time to make a decision like that. You'll forgive me, Major, but I can't simply join the Armed SS–"

"Do you or don't you?" the Vulture cut in icily, the smile gone, his pale blue eyes gleaming dangerously. At his side von Dodenburg felt sorry for the blustering tank captain.

"No," the other officer said lamely.

"Thank you, soldier," the Vulture snapped and in the same instant he reached out and ripped off first one and then the other of the tanker's epaulettes. "SS Soldier Stuke you may join the ranks."

"But, this... this is an outrage," the other man spluttered.

The Vulture ignored him completely. He turned to Officer Cadet Barsch, a one-armed veteran of the old Wotan, who had volunteered again for the Armed SS after being invalided out after losing his arm in 1941. Barsch's chest glittered with decorations for bravery. "Barsch, will you be so kind as to take over the 3rd Company. Ensure that every man has the Wotan arm-band sewn on before dawn."

"Sir!" Barsch yelled at the top of his voice, as if he were back on the parade ground at Bad Toelz. Pushing past the broken Panzer Captain, he bellowed at the new recruits. "Welcome to the Wotan! All right, follow me – at the double!"

As the black-uniformed tankers stumbled after him, laden down with their kit, the newly demoted Captain in the rear, the Vulture turned to von Dodenburg and said, "A word in your ear. Let the 3rd take the point – as long as they last. Barsch is a fool, but a brave one. He won't object. I need the old reliables for the real battle."

"Real battle, sir?"

"Division heard from Gehlen's office this morning. The Popovs are holding the bulk of their armour near Kursk. They haven't flung in half their stuff yet. I need my old reliables for the day when they do. Up to now the Popovs have just been playing with us."

Behind them Schulze groaned softly. "If this is the first act," he muttered, "I'd hate to see the fucking second one."

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On the morning of July 9th, the Battalion was suddenly pulled out of the line, and hurried eight kilometres to the rear to "receive an important personage", as the telephone order from Dietrich's HQ had it.

The important personage turned out to be Reichsführer Himmler

himself, his skinny frame clad in the field-grey of a general in the Armed SS, his hollow chest decorated with the sports medal in bronze, Iron Cross third class and what looked like the Party's Blood Order. As he stepped out of his *Storch*, followed by a tubby brown-clad figure who looked like a middle-weight boxer gone to seed, Schulze standing behind von Dodenburg said sotto voce, "Do you think he'll get the Knight's Cross out of this visit? They tell me he's got throatache."

"Shut up, Schulze," von Dodenburg snapped without turning his head, "Or I'll see you get arse-ache – damned quick, too!"

"SS Assault Battalion Wotan – attention!" Major Geier's voice rang out.

The Battalion snapped to attention. Stiffly the Vulture strode forward, halted the regulation six paces before the Reichsführer and a little burly Golden Pheasant von Dodenburg didn't know, both dwarfed by the immaculate SS aides, some of whom were nearly two metres tall, and bellowed, "SS Assault Battalion Wotan – four hundred men, eighteen officers, one officer-cadet – all present and correct, Reichsführer!"

Heinrich Himmler touched his pale, effeminate hand to his cap and smiled thinly. "Thank you, my dear Geier. Good to see you again – and by the way, you've got your lieutenant-colonel stars. I approved them yesterday."

The Vulture's face flushed with genuine pleasure. Promotion was the only thing that meant anything to him, apart from the beautiful powdered youths who frequented the Lehrter Station in Berlin after dark. "Thank you, Reichsführer," he barked, "I am sure the Battalion will be pleased at the honour."

The Reichsführer gave the Battalion a very careful inspection, behaving more like a sergeant-major than a commanding general, inspecting their tattered uniforms and dirty battle-damaged weapons as if they were back in peacetime Berlin and not in the heart of war-torn Russia. As Schulze sighed afterwards, "He got up so close to have a gander at my throatache," – he meant his Knight's Cross – "that I got more than enough of his sodding breath. God Almighty, it was so bad I'm surprised it didn't melt the flaming medal!"

But in the end the Reichsführer, who because he had been too young to see active service in WWI took his present military duties as the head of the Armed SS exceedingly seriously, was satisfied. They were stood at ease while the Reichsführer attempted to clamber up the steep sides of a Tiger in

order to address them. Twice he failed and waved aside the aides who rushed forward to help him while the fat Golden Pheasant grinned at his discomforture. But his spindly legs were not equal to the task and with an angry sigh, he beckoned to one of his gigantic aides to assist him.

Angrily he tugged at his tunic and faced them. "Men of Wotan – comrades," he began. "It gives me great pleasure to be able to speak to you today. I am also sad at the same time to see how thin your ranks have become. But that is the sad privilege of your elite battalion – to be at the forefront of any attack for Folk, Fatherland and Führer."

"Watch it, Heini," Schulze cracked to his neighbour. "You're going to rupture yourself if you go on like that!"

All around him the wooden-faced SS troopers tittered suddenly. But on the tank Himmler was too busy trying to get his breath back while the gigantic aide proferred him a glass of his favourite lemonade. He only touched alcohol on special occasions; his stomach was too delicate.

"But your sacrifices, comrades, have not been in vain. As you know, we are pushing back the Bolshevik beast steadily and inexorably. We are winning – definitely winning! Now you, as the point of the Führer's own Bodyguard, have been given the honour of delivering the death blow to the Soviet beast." He paused dramatically, his sickly face flushed a sudden hectic red.

"In forty-eight hours at the latest," Himmler continued, "you as the point will hit the Soviet's fourth and major line of defence. There the Soviets will have to stand and fight, or run away for ever. They will stand, according to our Intelligence. Thus it will be your honour to give the first blows of that tremendous battle." He paused to get his breath and in the front rank von Dodenburg could hear the air wheezing through his diseased lungs.

Down below, the Golden Pheasant looked at his watch and yawned in boredom, not even attempting to cover his mouth with his fat hand. Idly von Dodenburg wondered who he was, daring to affront Himmler in such a manner.

"Comrades, I cannot tell you very much. As you can realise what knowledge I have is highly secret. But this much I can say – the battle you will join in forty-eight hours' time will be the greatest tank battle in all history, and when you have fought it, those of you who survive will count it as the most significant event in your whole lives." His face cracked into a wintery smile. "And now comrades, before I and Folk Comrade Bormann

here leave," he nodded his head at the Golden Pheasant, whose broad face was beginning to brighten now at the smell of the food, "we should deem it an honour if you would join us for a simple soldier's lunch."

As the cooks began to plant the great tureens of steaming pea soup and sausage on the trestle tables set out behind the parade, the new Lieutenant-Colonel Geier bellowed, "Sieg Heil!" In his enthusiasm at his new promotion, he forgot his usual cynical distaste of the whole National Socialist theatricality.

"Sieg Heil!" the great cry rose from four hundred throats with a fervour that von Dodenburg, his face flushed an enthusiastic red as he stood there rigidly to attention, had not heard for a long, long time. Suddenly he felt confident again. The doubts cast by Sergeant Schulze vanished. They must beat the Popovs – they would.

"Sieg Heil," he screamed, his eyes gleaming fanatically. "Sieg Heil!"

Metzger was given the job of picking the waiters to serve Himmler's table. A handful of men were delegated to report to him and Schulze, who as the only other rank with the Knight's Cross was to be in charge. They went down their ranks quickly, selecting the ones he needed.

"You," Metzger snapped to a lanky youth from Romania, "say: *can I give you the salt, Reichsführer*." He groaned when the boy repeated the phrase in barely understandable German. "Get out of it, you shitty booty German, you!" he bellowed. "What the hell do you think this battalion is – the crappy Foreign Legion?"

A couple of others were turned down because they weren't blonde – it was well known that the Reichsführer only liked blonde SS men around him although he was sallow and dark enough himself. Metzger looked at the tall soldier at the end of the line who had just joined them from the 8th Panzer.

'You'll do," he said. "But get that black jacket off – you're in the SS now, remember."

The soldier's tough face cracked into a lazy grin. "Who could forget, sergeant?" he said impudently. "Pea soup and half a sausage with the Reichsführer one day, and a wooden overcoat the next! You certainly see life in the SS."

"Button up your thick lip, you asparagus Tarzan you!" Metzger said threateningly, but he had no time to 'make a sow' out of the man as he would have done normally; the Reichsführer wanted some more mineral water and the kitchen bulls couldn't find any. "Schulze," he said hurriedly, "check their

sausage fingers and see their nails haven't got half the steppe under them. Here, use this."

He picked up the Russian bayonet which the cooks had been using to chop up the sausages for Himmler's table and throwing it to Schulze, hurried away to find some more soda water. Schulze passed it swiftly down the line, giving it to each man in turn to clean his nails. He came level with the soldier from the Eighth.

"All right, asparagus Tarzan, let's see your pinkies!" Schulze stared at his left hand. On each finger he had a dark blue letter tattooed. "M-A-R-CH-E," he read out aloud. "Marche? What the hell does that mean?"

The big man held up his right hand. Each finger had a letter tattooed on it too.

"Marche ou creve, it says. It's French – and in case, you ain't as cultured as I am, Sergeant, that's frog for march or croak."

Schulze looked at him keenly. "You in the Legion?"

"Sure, Sergeant," the other man said easily. "Eight years. I deserted in North Africa in 1941 as soon as the Afrika Korps landed in Libya and made my way across the frontier."

"North Africa, eh," Schulze said thoughtfully. "I'd like to have a talk with you, my lad."

"Any time, Sergeant. But don't expect me to fall in love with you straight away. You see," the ex-legionnaire gave him a mock simper, "I left my one true love back in Africa."

Sergeant Schulze made an obscene gesture, but all the same he was not displeased with the new recruit from the 8th; a vague plan was beginning to form in his mind.

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Folk Comrade Bormann ate his first half-litre of pea soup greedily, concentrating on eating, as if it had been a long time since he had last eaten, completely ignoring Himmler, his staff and Wotan officers all around him. Then he speared his half sausage and ate it the way the peasants do from the fork, letting the grease run down his pugnacious chin. That finished he belched, wiped his chin and broke into the conversation brusquely.

"I'm a Mecklenburger, you know." His voice was coarse and harsh, and the assembled officers looked across at him startled. "A thousand years ago,

the Slavs lived there until we Germans kicked them out. Since then generations of good German peasants have toiled to make Mecklenburg and what lies east of it German – generation after generation of simple good German folk." He raised his voice, which in spite of its coarseness was full of authority, as though Bormann were used to giving orders and expected them to be obeyed. "Now if we don't beat the Bolsheviks this July, they will start pushing us back out of Russia. And they won't stop in Poland, nor in East Prussia. No, gentlemen, their target will be the Elbe, once the boundary of the ancient Slavic kingdom. Then Mecklenburg will be Slav again. That is why the battle you will be soon fighting, gentlemen, is so vital for the future of the Reich. It is as simple as that."

There was a moment of awkward silence while Folk Comrade Bormann stared challengingly at their battle-weary faces, as if he were expecting one of them to deny the truth of his bold statement.

"Of course you're right, Martin," Himmler said and wet his dry lips delicately with his mineral water. The coming battle here is vital for the Reich, but don't you think you are putting the matter into a too dramatic a light? I mean if you consider–"

"No," Bormann butted in harshly and von Dodenburg could see that the Golden Pheasant hardly disguised his contempt for the leader of the SS. "I am not being too dramatic, Heinrich. Let there be no mistake about it. This is a battle for the survival of the Reich. Time is running out. If we don't succeed in crushing the Bolsheviks this summer, we certainly will not be able to do it in the winter. All of us know what happened last winter, don't we?" A few of the assembled officers nodded their heads thoughtfully; Stalingrad and the tremendous debacle there was always at the backs of their minds.

Bormann flashed a hard look around the young faces of the Wotan officers. "Believe me the Führer is well aware of the great suffering you and your men have undergone. But he knows too that he must demand and receive even greater sacrifices from you in the coming battle. If you were to be at his side like I am, twenty hours a day and saw how he worried about you and Germany, you would know that your sacrifices do not go unnoticed. The loss of one single humble German grenadier cuts the Führer to the heart. Yet he has hardened himself to losses, as he must. You, too, must be harder – *as hard as Krupp steel*, as they used to say when I was a boy in Mecklenburg. You must ask and get the most brutal sacrifices out of your men in the coming battle. After all the fate of the Third Reich is in your hands."

He paused, sniffed and looking down at his empty bowl, as if he had already dismissed the 'fate of the Third Reich' from his cold logical mind, he said pleasantly, "I think I'll have another half-litre of that good pea soup, if I may – and half a sausage, if you can spare it, Colonel – er –"

"Geier," the Vulture snapped, flushing.

"Yes Colonel Geier. Could you arrange it?"

"Metzger," thundered the Vulture. "See the Reichsleiter has some more soup. We don't want him to leave the front thinking that we soldiers starve our visitors from the rear echelon, where, as everyone knows, food is in short supply." The insult was obvious, but the fat Golden Pheasant did not seem to notice it.

"Thank you," he said pleasantly.

"Don't put yer thumb in that soup, mate," the tough-looking ex-legionnaire said to the soldier waiter as he passed over the bowl of pea-soup intended for Reichsleiter Bormann. "It might fall off."

"Eh," the other man said surprised.

"Yeah, I just spat in it to season it and I don't think I've been properly cured from the last dose."

Schulze tossed half a sausage in Bormann's soup. It slopped over the side of the tin bowl. The waiter wiped it off with his sleeve.

"Get on with it," Schulze growled at the man. "This comedian here is just having you on. Now trot off, before you get the toe of my boot up your arse."

Schulze waited until he was out of earshot. "All right, you asparagus Tarzan you, what's your plan? And don't try to shit me, or you'll get a taste of the Reeperbahn equalizer." His hand fell to his pocket.

But the ex-legionnaire was quicker. His hand flashed to his trouser pocket. Before Schulze had even managed to locate his brass knuckles, a wicked, thin-bladed knife appeared in the other man's hand.

"First thing you learn in the Legion, sergeant. In the *compagnie de passage* – that's the training company – the old hands like the brown cake. If you don't want to become a warm brother for the rest of your time in the Legion, you learn how to be quick with a knife. Slash-slash to the back of their fat queer arses and they don't bother you again." He grinned lazily. "After all, by doing that you've spoiled their good looks, haven't you?" His grin was infectious. Schulze joined him and the ex-legionnaire slipped away the knife as quickly as it had appeared.

"I suppose you're right," Schulze said. "Come on, let's take the weight off our feet. I think even that fat little bastard of a Golden Pheasant has finished feeding his face by now."

In silence they walked to the shade of one of the nearby trees and sat down, their backs against it, watching the men drinking the beer the Reichsführer SS had brought for them in the *Storch*.

"One bottle between two men," Schulze snorted. "That's what I call generous. But then a sniff at the barmaid's apron would send half them greenbeaks over there roaring drunk."

"I've got half a crate," the other man said calmly. "I snitched it while you were cutting up the sausages."

Did you just!" Schulze exclaimed in admiration. "You're a smart lad – too smart to be in this mob."

"I know and I don't intend to be in it much longer." The ex-legionnaire pulled out a little shag pipe and the strangest looking tobacco pouch Schulze had ever seen.

"What the hell's that?"

"A Kabyle woman's tit," he answered, busily stuffing tobacco into his pipe. "I cut it off and cured it myself in '34. She was a young 'un – you can tell that by the nipple there and the quality of the skin – never a wrinkle."

Put the sodding thing away, will you," Schulze said in disgust. "What the hell will some people think of next!"

"Caporal Grimaldi had one made out of a Chink's testicles," the other man said conversationally. "They were so big you could stow a kilo of baccy in them." But he put the pouch away and said, "There are a lot of ways of doing it, you know Sergeant. I wouldn't go as far as infecting an eye with gonorrhea – you can lose it like that – but a bit of tartar from your teeth, rubbed into a wound can cause abscesses. Or perhaps a couple of drops of castor oil in your eye, bandage it up overnight and next morning you've got yourself the start of a nice juicy case of conjunctivitis. Then there's the trick of putting a cork upright in your boot and jumping down with it there from – say – two metres. That's a sure way of dislocating your ankle."

"All right, laddie, you don't need to draw me no more pictures – I get you. But what does it all add up to? You're still in the Army and when the bone-menders have seen you off, you're back where you started – in SS Assault Battalion Wotan. And you know what that means?"

The legionnaire's calm look vanished. "Yeah," he said thickly, "the

quick chop in double time."

"Right in one. This is the third time this flaming Battalion has done a stint in Popovland and it's going to be no different from any other, believe you me." He pointed to the bronzed youths drinking their beer at the trestle tables. "Most of them greenbeaks over there will be looking at the potatoes from below before this month's out."

"And you don't intend to be among them, Sarge?"

"No, you ain't shitting, soldier. Mrs Schulze's little boy has had a noseful, right up to here."

"And how are you gonna pull it off?" the other man asked.

"Never you mind just yet. But I am. The question is, you asparagus Tarzan, can I count on you when the time comes? I need somebody like you who knows the world."

Before the ex-legionnaire could answer, Metzger was bellowing angrily at them. "Come on Schulze, what the hell do you think this is – a Jew school or something? The Reichsführer is going and we've got to form up. Come on – get the lead out of your shitty arses, will you?"

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The *Storch*'s engine roared. In front of it on the parched yellow steppe, what was left of SS Assault Battalion Wotan stood rigidly to attention beneath the burning white sun. Standing to von Dodenburg's right, the new Colonel Geier had his hand touched to his cap in salute, the sweat pouring off his burned face.

At the door the two important visitors paused. Reichsführer Himmler took a last look at the hard-faced young men who were staring at some far vista. Even above the roar of the plane's engine, he could hear the rumble of the heavies as they began to pound the Soviet position, prior to the great tank attack. Tears of emotion came to his dark eyes. Swiftly he took off his clouded pince-nez that made him look like some provincial schoolmaster and rubbed them clear.

"Comrades," he said thickly, "I, your Reichsführer, salute you." He clicked his spindly legs together in the position of attention and flung out his hand in the German greeting. "Heil Hitler."

Just behind von Dodenburg Schulze strained himself to launch one of his farts as an expression of his contempt for the base stallions who could

send so many men to a violent death with so little thought. But the Golden Pheasant Bormann, standing next to the Reichsführer, beat him to it. He belched loudly, grabbed Himmler by the arm and said carelessly, "Oh for God's sake, Heinrich, come on. There's fried chicken at the Führer's Headquarters tonight. And if we don't get there soon, that greedy bastard of a photographer Hoffmann will have eaten it all up."

BOOK 3 – CLASH AT KURSK

"The battle you will join in forty-eight hours' time will be the greatest tank battle in all history, and when you have fought it, those of you who survive will count it as the most significant event in your whole lives."

Heinrich Himmler to the officers of Wotan. July 9th, 1943.

CHAPTER 13

As the great ball of the crimson sun slid over the horizon, the Russian Major-General braced himself against the lone tree on the hill overlooking the battlefield and focused his glasses on the Fritzes' line.

The debris of war came into view: broken ammo boxes, abandoned jerricans, rusting wire, shattered Russian and German tanks already beginning to sparkle in the sun's first threatening rays. Beyond were the Fritzes' laagers, huge boxes of silent Tigers and Panthers, their great hooded guns hanging low. But in the heavy silence that hung over the battlefield, the Russian General fancied he could hear a faint hammering from the German camp and the clatter of metal against metal. Swiftly he adjusted his glasses. As he had suspected men were hurrying everywhere, getting the tanks ready for the day's great battle.

"The Fritzes are early risers, Comrade General Rotmistrov," he muttered to his companion, the commander of the Fifth Guards Tank Army.

Rotmistrov, the Red Army's greatest tank expert, looked down at the little Ukrainian politico. "They are a great people, the Germans, Comrade Khrushchev," he said, carefully concealing his dislike of the other man. "They work hard and they fight hard."

"True. Comrade Lenin thought them a great people. For many years he believed that they would start the world revolution. He was mistaken, wasn't he?" Khrushchev lowered his glasses and smiled, revealing his misshapen yellow teeth. But there was no corresponding warmth in his eyes. He dug his thumb into his barrel chest. "But in this I, Nikita Khrushchev, will not be wrong, Comrade General. Today, down there on that plain, we Russians will fight and beat the Fritzes – and we shall beat them so soundly that they will never rise again. Today, Comrade General Rotmistrov, we shall win the war!"

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"Rotmistrov," Schwarz had asked the night before at the briefing, "is that a Jewish name?"

"I do not know, my dear Schwarz," the Vulture had answered. "And I

really don't care if his mother were a cross-eyed whore from the Reeperbahn and his father the legendary Polack Yid from Lvov. All that concerns me – and you – is that he is a highly competent Popov tank commander who gave us a bad time at Stalingrad and who will oppose us tomorrow with fifteen hundred tanks!"

That had made the assembled officers start and the Vulture had laughed coldly. "Yes, I thought that would startle you gentlemen, especially as Colonel-General Hoth can only muster eight hundred tanks and SP to oppose them. In short we will be outnumbered by two to one."

"But we are the SS, sir," Schwarz had protested hotly.

For a moment the Vulture had said nothing; then he had tugged at the end of his monstrous beak of a nose and rasped, "Yes, my dear young Schwarz, we are the SS as you rightly say. Let us hope our Popov friends on the other side of that rise realise that, eh?"

But now as the laager broke up with a yelping of locked tracks, the hiss of hydraulics and the thick throaty roar of diesels bursting into life, von Dodenburg could not help feeling a tremendous sense of power, despite the fact that they were so grievously outnumbered. As the tanks fanned out, the first rays of the sun turning their glacis plates blood-red, the sight of so many German tanks deploying for the drive which would take them this day south-east of Kursk, he was overcome by the sense of immense supremacy. Surely nothing would be able to stop their tremendous drive – even if the Popovs outnumbered them ten to one? Here was the elite of Germany's armour, manned by the best soldiers in the world, each a convinced believer in the holy creed of National Socialism, Europe's only hope against the evil of Communism.

As the Wotan formed up with the Vulture's command Tiger in the centre and started to rumble forward at ten kilometres an hour, the drivers squinting against the sun, the steppe remained empty and uncannily quiet. At von Dodenburg's side in the turret, Schulze tensed, waiting for the first frightening flash on the horizon. But to the young officer, he and the rest of the crew seemed possessed of an animal patience. How else could they stand the terrible wait before the first brazen metal started ripping into them, tearing out tendons, muscles, nerves?

Down below, the new driver whom Schulze had picked from the 8th Division reinforcements revved the engine suddenly. Von Dodenburg jumped nervously. For a moment he was angry with the man.

"Hartmann," he snapped into the throat mike, but changed his mind and switched off the intercom. He'd probably only been cleaning out a dirty plug or something. Von Dodenburg looked down at his watch again. The minutes were crawling. He licked his dry lips for the umpteenth time.

Here and there some of the younger tank commanders were already buttoning up for the action which must come. But still the horizon remained empty and the sun slanting in at an awkward angle made it difficult for the Germans to see if the Popovs had concealed positions waiting for them. Nothing stirred.

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Suddenly a flare hissed into the still morning sky. For what seemed a very long time it hung there, sending out showers of silver sparks into the light blue, before it died and descended to the steppe like a falling angel. But what happened next was in no way angelic. The horizon shook abruptly. There was a sound like a great piece of canvas being ripped apart. Red lights rippled all along the horizon to their right flank. White burning blobs flew towards them, increasing in speed at every moment.

"Anti-tank fire," the Vulture screamed over the radio. "Deploy–"

His words were drowned by the great clang of metal against metal. A Mark IV close to von Dodenburg's Tiger reared up on its rear sprockets like a bucking bronco and came to a sudden halt. Solid shot was flying everywhere. Suddenly the air was full of the acrid stink of cordite, scorched metal and burned human-flesh. Von Dodenburg snapped into action.

"Gunner – traverse right... Up a hundred... Popov 57 gun!"

Hurriedly Schulze swung the great hooded 88 round to the Soviet anti-tank gun, his big fingers working the elevating mechanism almost lovingly. "On," he rapped.

"Fire!"

The air in front of the Tiger flashed a bright yellow. The turret rocked like a shaken toy. Blast flew into the turret and the spent shell case rattled to the floor. Von Dodenburg shoved in the next round. Hurriedly he peered through his periscope.

"Short, Schulze," he yelled.

"Shit!" Schulze cursed.

"Up fifty!"

Schulze's fingers worked the wheel crazily. The next instant he pulled the firing lever. The turret heaved again. Von Dodenburg flung himself on the periscope. His circle of vision was thick with smoke. Abruptly it cleared. Where the Popov 57-mm had been, there was a gaping glowing hole, littered with bits and pieces which had been men a moment before.

"We've got the bastard," he yelled exuberantly. Got him!"

"Christ, sir – look out!" Hartmann's voice cut into their cries of triumph urgently. "There's three of the Ivan bastards at eleven o'clock!"

Schulze reacted first. As the one-armed commander of the Third Company's Tiger blazed and skidded to a sudden halt, he fired. The first Russian anti-tank gun disappeared in a vicious red ball of flame. Immediately the remaining two, cunningly concealed in a slight hollow only three hundred metres away, swung their long barrels onto von Dodenburg's tank. A whooshing rush. That well-remembered frightening whiplash. And the first solid shot hushed by them like a bat out of hell.

"Hartmann," von Dodenburg shouted frantically into the throat mike. "Find me a bit of ground. I want to tackle the bastards hull down!"

"Sir." The ex-legionnaire was a good soldier, there was no denying that. He charged straight into the thick white smoke pouring from Barsch's crippled Tiger. It shielded them a little from the Russians. When it seemed they would crash into the Third Company tank, he swerved swiftly to the right. Immediately he ran up the Tiger's forward gears, bringing her up to top speed while her whole flank was exposed to the Soviet guns. Before the Popovs could range, the Tiger had buried her nose into a slight depression and von Dodenburg was almost flung out of his metal seat with the impact.

"First class, Hartmann!" he bellowed.

"Don't bother about the medal, sir," the driver replied coolly, not even breathing hard. "I'll just take an immediate transfer to the paymaster branch."

Von Dodenburg laughed. "Schulze engage!" he yelled the next moment as the infuriated Russians started pounding the earth in front of their glacis plate with solid shot.

Blinded as he was by earth and flying pebbles, Schulze took careful aim. The long gun erupted. The Tiger reared like a live thing. A high explosive shell crashed into the steppe fifty metres in front of the first Russian gun.

"Short, Schulze," von Dodenburg cried angrily. "For Chris-sake man, get your finger out!"

"But sir–"

Schulze's protest was cut short by the chatter of the driver's machine gun below. A vicious burst of white tracer zig-zagged flatly across the scorched steppe and ripped into the fleeing crew of the first Soviet anti-tank gun. The shot had been close enough for them. They were attempting to flee. In vain. Hartmann cut down the first three with his burst, waited till the fourth man feigning death among his dying comrades, risked making a break for it and ripped his body apart neatly before he had gone five metres.

"Will they never learn," he shouted over the crackling intercom, full now of the static of battle. "If he'd just have stayed where he was, he might have lived to tell the story to his grandkids."

"Grandkids," Schulze snorted, obviously angry with von Dodenburg for his criticism. "Who in Christ's name would want grandkids – for this!"

"Knock it off, Schulze," von Dodenburg ordered. "Plaster that other gun with everything you've got – it's stopping the whole company!"

To their right another Mark IV brewed up menacingly. The tank commander dropped from the cupola, his coverall a mass of angry flames. He rolled himself over to put out the flames. Screaming wildly, he rose to his feet again and ran blindly across the steppe, the flames mounting higher and higher until he crashed into one of their own tanks. The driver did not see him. The man disappeared beneath the Tiger's great tracks. When they reappeared they were covered with a sticky red pulp.

Schulze pulled the firing lever. High explosive burst over the heads of the second Russian crew. Shrapnel pattered onto the shield of the anti-tank gun. A tyre burst and the 57-mm sank to one side. The crew panicked. They began to run. But Hartmann was waiting for them. Again his 7.62-mm spoke. Eight hundred slugs a minute hissed through the air. The Popovs were cut down screaming.

"Excellent, von Dodenburg," a voice rasped suddenly over the radio. "But get on the stick again. You're bogging down." It was the Vulture.

Hastily von Dodenburg pressed the button. "Yes, sir, will do. Advance on the present bearing?"

"Yes," the Vulture's voice was as calm as it had ever been on any training exercise in Westphalia. "I've been observing the Popov fire. It was good to begin with. It's getting worse. They're obviously losing their nerve. The closer we get to that ridge where their anti-tank guns are, the more chance we have. They won't be able to depress the sodding guns enough to

hit us. Are you with me?"

"Yessir."

"Good – and good hunting, von Dodenburg."

"Thank you, sir."

As the First Company started to advance again in extended order, von Dodenburg's mouth fell open. The smoke of war cleared for a moment. Immediately the Popov antitank guns on the ridge began firing again. But it wasn't the guns; it was what lay beyond them. From one side of the horizon to the other, there was nothing but solidly massed Soviet tanks – hundreds, no thousands of them! Next to him in the yellow, smoke-filled turret, Schulze breathed in an awed voice, "Great crap on the Christmas Tree, do you see that, sir?"

Von Dodenburg could not answer. He was afraid: more afraid than he had ever been in his life before. Slowly, inexorably, the two great masses of machines began to close in on each other.

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The Führer's knuckles whitened – a sign of inner tension – as the grey-clad 'field mattresses' added more and more newly identified Soviet formations to the great table map of the Eastern front. They were not just battalions, or regiments, but whole divisions, corps, armies! The backs of the girls' thick uniforms were stained black with sweat, as they hurried to the table from the telephones, to place yet another counter on it. Adolf Hitler turned to a pale-faced Jodl, his face aghast.

"My God, Jodl, where are the Bolsheviks getting the men from?" Without waiting for an answer, he said hoarsely, "Have you checked with Gehlen that these identifications are correct?"

Major Buechs, Jodl's highly intelligent aide, who had played such a decisive role in planning the great invasion of the West in 1940, butted in. "I think we can rely on General Gehlen, my Führer. His identifications are realistic."

Hitler turned on him angrily, glad to have found a victim, a chance to vent his rage. "Good, Buechs, but does Gehlen know the actual strength of these Bolshevik formations? Are we sure that when we talk of a Soviet regiment, it is not really of battalion strength?"

"Naturally the Russians have reduced the strength of their formations,

my Führer, just as we have. But when Gehlen speaks of a regiment, he means a regiment."

Adolf Hitler's sickly face flushed a hectic red. Looking at him, Jodl told himself that the man wouldn't last a year, in spite of all the dope that his Doctor Morrell – charlatan that he was – was pumping into him.

"Thank you, Buechs, you may dismiss," Hitler said stiffly.

Buechs, his face set angrily, clicked his heels and marched out as if he were on parade. Jodl laughed to himself. He had stood the Führer's moods for four years; it would take more than that to rile him.

Urgently Hitler grabbed his arm. "Blondi – come," he commanded hoarsely. The big Alsatian bitch, her tongue hanging out in the heat, rose lazily from the floor and followed them outside. The leaden oppressive heat struck them in the face like a clammy fist. In the firs the SS bodyguard shook themselves awake and gripped their weapons more firmly in their sweaty fists. As the two men began to stroll through the white Ukrainian dust, their beads bent deep in conversation, the soldiers followed them like evil black shadows.

"Jodl, I've never liked the Citadel idea. You and your comrades of the Greater German General Staff talked me into it. Now look what kind of a mess you've got me into."

"Yes, my Führer," Jodl said dutifully. *Victory has many fathers,* he told himself cynically, *defeat, however–* He left the thought unfinished; the Führer was speaking again.

"But where in heaven's name, have the Bolsheviks got such strength from? We knew they outnumbered us. But fifteen hundred tanks and ever new vehicles pouring onto the battlefield! I ask you, it is hardly believable. Jodl, what do you say?"

But Jodl was not prepared to comfort him as he had always done at such moments in the past. The Führer would finally have to face up to reality. National Socialist Germany was losing the war.

Hitler's restless brain moved more quickly than that of his chief aide. "Good," he said suddenly, stopping and gripping Jodl by the arm. "If we cannot put the same kind of armour into the field that the Soviets can, we must compensate some other way." He smiled suddenly, the smile of a crazy man. "Why didn't I think of it before?"

"Think of what, my Führer?" Jodl asked dutifully, his body suddenly tense to face what might soon come. He knew only too well what the Führer's

hunches were like.

"Rudel – Rudel, of course!" Hitler said eagerly. "Colonel Rudel of the Luftwaffe. Whatever else one might say of Goering's Luftwaffe, there is no denying Rudel's ability and bravery. How many times has he been wounded since the beginning of hostilities?"

"Nine times, my Führer," Jodl answered promptly, wondering again why he, as Chief-of-Staff, should be expected to remember such trivia. Yet at the same time he knew that if he didn't, he wouldn't last twenty-four hours in Hitler's entourage. "Twice severely."

"That just shows," Hitler said enthusiastically. "A man like that, still flying and fighting after so many wounds." He smashed his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "A man like that is worth a whole Soviet corps! All right, Jodl, inform Luftwaffe headquarters that I want Colonel Rudel's five squadrons of tank hunters to join the battle immediately – do you understand, immediately?" But before Jodl could muster the expected enthusiasm, Buechs came running out of the conference room, his face wild with shock.

"My Führer," he called. "My Führer!"

"What is it, Buechs?" Hitler snapped.

The Major thrust the flimsy message into Hitler's hand. "Just arrived from Field Marshal Rommel, my Führer –most immediate," he gasped.

Hitler took it out of his hand, his face still flushed with the enthusiasm of his sudden decision. Awkwardly he fumbled for the gold-rimmed spectacles in which Hoffmann was never allowed to photograph him. Finally he focused them on the message. A long animal groan rose from deep within him. A muscle in the side of his face began to tick dangerously.

"What is it, my Führer?" Jodl asked in alarm, putting out his hands as if he might have to support his leader.

Wordlessly Hitler handed the top secret message to him. It was simple and to the point, but Jodl knew Rommel's handful of words meant the end of the Thousand Year Reich:

"ALLIES LANDED SICILY THIS MORNING. ROMMEL."

CHAPTER 14

It was furnace-hot now. The glare cut the eye like a knife. Above the waiting panzers the sky was smoke-coloured and menacing. Through it the sun glittered like a copper coin. But despite the murderous heat, they were ready, the identification panel spread out across the fronts of their tanks, the huge arrows draped over the burned charred grass pointing in the direction of the Soviet lines. The tank hunters could come now.

"There they are!" Schulze yelled suddenly and pointed up to the west.

"Here they come!" the men of Wotan took up the cry everywhere, clambering up on the decks of the stalled Tigers and Mark TVs to get a better view, heedless of the fact that there were still Popov snipers about.

Like black hawks they came roaring in from the sun. A whole squadron of Stuka tank busters. Now they hovered over the battlefield, poised to fall on their prey. Suddenly the leader moved his bent-hawk wings. Once, twice, three times. it was the signal.

The first flight peeled off. The first black shape came roaring down, its sirens screaming hideously. Immediately the Popov flak beyond the rise snapped into action. Puffballs of cotton-white erupted all around the Stuka, but Colonel Rudel, the Luftwaffe's ace, pressed home his attack. Just when he seemed about to plunge into the churned, battle-littered earth at 400 mph, he levelled out. A myriad of black eggs fell from the Stuka's white-painted belly. The earth around the first Popov armoured position vomited upwards in ugly black clouds.

On the panzers the troopers yelled with joy. As Rudel soared high into the sky, vicious red and yellow flames split the black pall. T-34 after T-34 was hit. White and green tracer ammunition zig-zagged crazily in all directions.

"Go on, give it to the Bolshevik bastards!" they cried in frenzied excitement as the next Stuka hurtled down.

The air became a thick choking fog of yellow steppe dust and dense oily smoke. The whole battlefield was one monstrous din through which the SS men could faintly hear the tortured cries of wounded and dying Russians. And then, as suddenly as it had started, the attack stopped. The flak dwindled to isolated bangs. The noise of Stukas grew fainter and fainter as they flew

back the way they had come, leaving behind a wrecked Russian first line.

But Rudel's tank busters were not finished yet. The Stukas had hardly vanished when there was the drone of fresh planes from the west. Almost instantly two squadrons of Henschel 129 took shape on the horizon. Immediately all eyes flashed in that direction. Von Dodenburg's dirty face lit up.

"There are more of them. Now we'll show the Popovs!"

"They're not tanks though," Schulze said dourly, as the roar grew louder. "They're still not tanks."

"Oh go on, you ray of sunshine," von Dodenburg said, shielding his eyes against the glare and studying the cannon-bearing tank busters – eighteen of them in all, already breaking up into their attack formation.

One flight turned slightly to the east, another swung west while a third kept to the centre so that they were spread out like the three prongs of an enormous hay fork. The Soviet flak swung into action. A Henschel staggered visibly in the sky. Thick white smoke started to pour from its starboard engine. The pilot tried to hold it, but failed. Carefully he began to lose height, obviously nursing his crippled plane down for an emergency landing on the steppe. With anxious eyes the men of Wotan began to follow him down, their sweating fists clenched tensely. Suddenly the Henschel burst into a gigantic ball of flame. It shattered into a million pieces, snuffed out like a candle. The rest of the formation flew on steadily.

Now they were over the Soviet positions. The leader of the first flight flapped his wings. In the same instant he threw his plane into a dive. At three hundred miles an hour they came roaring down, their cannon firing.

All hell broke loose in the Soviet lines. The first wave swept in at one hundred and fifty metres, their under-carriages down acting as a brake. The 20-mm shells came streaming from their wings. T-34 after T-34 brewed up suddenly. The watchers on the ground could see panic-stricken Russian tankers abandoning their vehicles even before they were hit. Time and time again the Henschels came in at ground level, twisting and weaving crazily to avoid the Popov flak before pulling up in a back-breaking climb in order to do it again.

On the waiting Tigers, the crews yelled themselves hoarse, waving their arms frantically, as the Henschels roared in low over their heads, the white blobs of their pilots' heads clearly visible.

But this time the Luftwaffe was not going to have it all their own way.

The Soviets had been alarmed. From the east swarms of Yak fighters roared into the battle. The sky was criss-crossed from horizon to horizon by scores of white vapour trails, as the planes weaved back and forth in single combat. But the Henschels were no match for the swifter, more nimble Yaks. One after one they were shot from the skies.

One crippled Henschel, thick white smoke pouring from its riddled engine, came screaming into their laager. It hit the ground, sprang up a good thirty metres, hit the steppe again and somersaulted to a stop. Another crashed between two trees, its wings snapping off like twigs. Its pilot stepped out with a shaky grin on his deathly pale face and asked for a schnapps; then he fainted.

But he was one of the lucky ones. The Yaks knocked the slower-moving Henschels out of the sky everywhere, screaming in low over the German tanks, executing flashy barrel rolls to demonstrate their victory to the impotent tankers. And then it was all over and what was left of the Henschels were fleeing to the west, leaving the sky in the hands of the Russians.

Schulze spat drily into the dust and watched as the smoke began to clear over the Soviet positions. When it did, it was clear that the Popovs had been hurt. Scores of tanks were crippled and burning all over the scorched Steppe. But behind them hundreds more waited: black, squat, and impassive shapes, their cannon now swinging round to face the Germans again.

"Hell," he commented sourly. "I've closed my eyes twice, but the sods won't go away, Hartmann."

The ex-legionnaire's usual lazy, cynical smile was absent. "Well, sarge, if they won't go away–" he stopped abruptly and looked Schulze directly in the face.

"I read you, Hartmann," Schulze said slowly. "You don't need to send me no telegram. If they won't go away, we must, eh?"

Before Hartmann could answer, the officers began blowing their whistles. Tanks' motors burst into noisy life. Von Dodenburg ran back from the Vulture's command Tiger, holding on to his pistol holster.

"Mount up," he cried. "Mount up. We're going to attack before the Ivans recover again."

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The bombardment started with the roar of an infuriated beast. Countless

flashes of violent fire cut the plain behind them. A deafening thunder. The next instant the whole weight of the corps artillery hit the Soviet first line of attack. The earth shuddered. Even behind the thick armour of their Tiger they could feel the blast. Automatically they opened their mouths to prevent their ear drums being burst.

"Enemy tanks – two o'clock," an unknown voice crackled over the radio. "Thousands of the bastards!"

Von Dodenburg flung a quick glance around the gloomy turret. The red control light showed a black FA sign. All guns were cleared. He looked at Schulze crouched over his eyepiece. They were ready for action. He threw a quick glance through the look-out slit. The smoking landscape in front of him was jammed with Soviet tanks and SPs. Tank after tank crawling forward to them.

Over the radio the Vulture's voice rasped, almost cheerfully for once. "Now, gentlemen, I think it is time that we exercised our calling. Roll them!"

Hartmaan put the sixty-ton monster in gear. To their left and right the line of Wotan's tanks began to move out to meet the enemy. There was the typewriter chatter of a Soviet machine gun. The golden-white tracer scudded off their cupola like crazy golf balls.

"Don't fire, Schulze," von Dodenburg ordered quickly. "They're only ranging in."

"I wasn't going to, sir," Schulze said with unusual quietness. He looked like a man who was fighting some inner battle. But at that moment von Dodenburg had not time enough to concern himself with the problem. His blood-shot eyes were searching their immediate front, while he counted the number of Popov T-34s facing Wotan's forty odd tanks. When he had reached one hundred and fifty, he gave up in despair.

Schwarz's Second began the action. They were slightly to the right and in advance of the rest of the Battalion. As usual, Schwarz was eager for glory and battle. He got both. Suddenly his dozen mixed Tigers and Mark IVs picked up speed and went straight for an enormous concentration of T-34s.

"For Chrissake, Schwarz," von Dodenburg began, but the words died on his lips.

The strange somnambulist advance of the Russians stopped abruptly. Frantically the Soviet gunners swung their 76s round to concentrate on the Germans. Everywhere the commanders were up in their turrets, waving their flags like crazy boy scouts.

Schwarz's gunners did not miss the excellent target. Red tracer hissed across the gap between the two groups. Soviet tank commanders went down everywhere. Hastily turret flaps closed and the Soviet gunners pulled their firing levers.

Pillars of white smoke flew up on all sides, as the Soviets fired wildly into the daring little handful of Germans. Over the radio, Schwarz's voice crackled exuberently. "We've got them rattled, men. Come on now. Let's show them what SS Assault Battalion Wotan is made of!"

The 88s and 75s burst into life. Solid shot tore flatly through the burning air. The next instant the shells were crashing into the Soviet armour with a sound like a smith beating an anvil. Suddenly the radio was full of orders and cries of rage or triumph. "T-34 firing now... by that scrub... hit him low. Fire! Christ on a crutch, you missed! ... Up a hundred... up a hundred, I said! ... That's it. Fire again!" Almost at once the battle developed into a confused dogfight. Raw jabs of flame pierced the oily smoke, followed instants later by the great crump of another tank brewing up.

Schwarz was right in among the Russians now. T-34s were flaming everywhere. But his own tanks were suffering serious casualties. As the rest of the Battalion fringed the skirmish, rolling inexorably to the mass of the Russian attack, they could see how vehicle after vehicle was being hit.

"My Christ, look at that!" Schulze yelled suddenly and dug von Dodenburg in the ribs painfully.

The cheerful blond giant who had carried the grenades on the first day of the attack was swaying on the engine covers of a burning Tiger, trying to haul out someone inside. At first von Dodenburg thought he was kneeling. Then he saw his mistake. The giant had balanced himself on the two bloody stumps of what had been his legs. Behind him the wooden boxes containing the 7.62 machine gun ammo were beginning to burn.

"Jump," von Dodenburg yelled into the throat mike purposelessly. "For God's sake, jump, man!"

But the blond giant could not hear. Next instant the nearest wooden box erupted and the giant disappeared in a blinding white blaze.

Now Schwarz was all alone. His company had vanished, swamped by the sheer weight of the T-34s. On all sides the Russians concentrated their fire on his lone Tiger. Still he did not make smoke and try to retreat. A 76-mm caught him in the flank. The Tiger rocked as if on a rough sea; ugly red sparks flew from the rear sprocket. For a moment it was obscured in smoke.

Von Dodenburg, his hands damp with sweat, peered through his periscope helplessly. But when the smoke cleared, the Tiger was still moving forward, though at a reduced speed.

"Lieutenant Schwarz, I order you to break off the action," the Vulture's voice. "Do you hear, Schwarz? Break it off now!"

The only answer was a crazy cackle over the radio, distorted even more by the static as half a dozen T-34s concentrated their fire on the Tiger. The huge tank heeled back and forth. Great gleaming metal scars appeared suddenly all along its right side. A thin white stream of smoke began to escape from the engine cowling. Still the metal monster rolled on, its great gun swinging from left to right, as the gunner attempted to fend off the final attack.

The Soviet fire intensified angrily. Another T-34 flamed and the crew scrambled madly out of the escape hatches to be mown down without mercy. Then a lucky Soviet shot snapped a track pin on the left track. It flopped out behind the Tiger like a broken limb. The tank gave a great lurch and came to a sudden stop. Schwarz, crazy as he was, reacted at once. He made smoke.

"For God's sake, run for it, Schwarz!" the Vulture yelled over the radio as the thick white fumes enveloped the dying Tiger. Schwarz did so. But he was cunning enough to let his crew go first. In a panic-stricken bunch they appeared suddenly out of the white fog to be mown down by the concentrated fire of a dozen Soviet machine guns.

"Arse up, Heil Stalin!" Schulze cursed, his voice full of helpless bitterness. "Why the hell did they bunch like that–"

He broke off suddenly. Schwarz had appeared from the smoke. He was on his stomach, a Schmeisser in one hand, the other thick with blood streaming from a shattered shoulder. cautiously he glanced left and right and began to crawl for the cover of a knocked-out T-34, its dead crew sprawled out carelessly around it. Five metres – ten. Schwarz seemed to be in luck. While Wotan rolled ever closer to the mass of the Soviet tanks, von Dodenburg could not drag his eyes off the little officer squirming his way through the dust to safety. It seemed to him at that moment that if Schwarz made it, they would too.

Suddenly the Soviets discovered him. Angry tracer sliced the air low. Schwarz stumbled to his feet, his blood dripping into the dust. Awkwardly he began to stagger for cover, lead stitching a fiery trail at his feet.

"Come on, come on," von Dodenburg heard himself crying and felt the

sweat pour from his body. "For Chrissake, Schwarz, do it!"

But a rapid burst caught Schwarz in the back.

"*Sch-wartz!*" von Dodenburg bawled. Schwarz's knees buckled. His arms dangled as his body lost its ability to stay upright. The Schmeisser clattered out of his nerveless fingers. Slowly Schwarz sank to the ground, and as the first of Wotan's 88s cracked into action, von Dodenburg knew that they could not win now.

CHAPTER 15

Colonel Jodl gave the details with cold clinical precision, while the Führer, his senior generals and the staff listened in stiff-backed, rigid silence.

"Montgomery has put his Eighth Army ashore here. We've already identified his 12 and 30 Corps – both from the Desert. That cowboy Patton has landed personally with his Seventh Army here." He smiled coldly, but his clever eyes did not light up. "No doubt we shall be seeing him do it personally in the next US Army newsreel we capture. That man certainly has an eye for personal publicity." He tapped the big man of Sicily with his elegantly manicured hand. "They've got Syracuse already and undoubtedly they will take Gela soon. No doubt our Allies will put up a show of resistance on the Catanian Plain." He did not attempt to hide his contempt at the expense of the Italians. "But I'll give Montgomery a week. As slow as he is, he'll be on the Straits of Messina this time next week."

"So that's it," Model said brutally, summing up what all of them were thinking. "We've lost Sicily." He fixed his monocle more firmly and glared at Hitler as if he were personally responsible. "This means the end of Operation Citadel, what?"

Hitler did not notice the look, but he came straight to the point. The new threat seemed to have cleared his mind; he was his old self. "Thanks to the miserable leadership of the Italians it is as good as certain that Sicily will be lost," he said. "Maybe Eisenhower will land tomorrow on the Italian mainland or in the Balkans. When that happens our entire European south flank will be directly threatened. I must prevent that."

Slowly he walked to the window, clenching and unclenching his fists, as if he were working out the problem within himself, weighing up, first one point and then the other. Outside the black-uniformed guards lurked in the firs, always watchful. Blondi lay sprawled in the dusty shade, her long purple tongue hanging out as she gasped for air. It was terribly hot again despite the earliness of the hour.

Hitler turned suddenly and faced his generals. "I need divisions for Italy, gentlemen. Since they can't be taken from any other place, they must come from Russia."

"Kursk?" Model snapped.

"Yes, Model. Kursk. I'll move the First Panzer Division from France to the Peloponnese. But I need more armour down in the south so that I can move quickly wherever the Anglo-Americans strike. I'll have to take most of Hoth's armour, or at least his SS Corps. They're his best."

They were, Jodl told himself for he had just seen the latest casualty figures, but naturally he did not say that to the Führer, who snapped, "Jodl, order the SS Corps to be withdrawn immediately."

"But that means the end of Citadel, as I have already stated," Model persisted, his face flushing an even deeper red than normal.

Hitler turned on him. "For the time being, Model." He clenched his fists and his face hardened, full of the fire which had taken him out of the Viennese slums to be the head of Europe's greatest nation. "But we shall go back, Model. Believe you me – we shall go back!"

Jodl sighed and mentally began making out the withdrawal order for the SS Corps, while the Führer and his generals stared at each other in tense silence.

***

"Attention all commanders... attention all commanders," the Vulture's voice snapped through the static. "I say again hold your fire! Gentlemen, I'd like to wish you luck." For the first time in four years that he had known him, von Dodenburg sensed a note of emotion in the CO's voice. "And good shooting!"

"Good shooting," Schulze snorted as the radio went dead again. "We'll need more than flaming good shooting to cope with them Ivan sods out there."

"Hold your wind," von Dodenburg snapped and concentrated on the Popov tanks coming ever closer.

"*Crap* said the King and a thousand arseholes bent and took the strain, for in those days the word of the King was law," Schulze muttered sourly under his, breath. But he, too, busied himself with his sight.

There must be at least a hundred Popov tanks rumbling towards us, von Dodenburg told himself grimly, more than the whole Bodyguard could probably muster after yesterday's hellish fighting. Panting suddenly, for no reason that he could analyse, he watched the midday sun catch the serrations on the protective spare tracks that the Popovs had slung over their glacis

plates. The T-34s were buttoned down, obviously ready for battle, and von Dodenburg knew that the Popovs, like them, were adjusting their range scales, checking their controls, ready with the next round at the command to fire.

He flung a glance to left and right, checking the Vulture's dispositions. The CO had put his remaining tanks in pretty good positions. He had taken over the remnants of Schwarz's Second and given them the advantage of some shallow hillocks so that they could take up a hull-down defensive position if necessary. The Third, over to his own right flank, had been given a more mobile role and were hurrying to outflank the Russian attack. For his part, his six remaining Tigers would hold the centre, relying on the strength of their glacis plate armour to withstand any concentrated Russian fire – that was as long as they could keep the Russians at a distance with their own superior 88s.

Their defence was excellent, yet the Soviet force rumbling into the attack was awesome, even after yesterday's tremendous numbers. Even in his wildest dreams, he had never seen so much enemy armour. Suddenly the second-lieutenant, who now commanded the 3rd, broke into his consciousness, his voice distorted by fear.

"Attention all stations... attention all stations! I'm going to engage now. Range three hundred metres... And wish me luck!" the fearful young voice stopped abruptly.

Von Dodenburg swung his periscope round hurriedly. To his right, the first Mark IV fired – and missed.

"Stupid bastard!" he cursed aloud. "You should have waited!"

But the Tiger next to the Mark IV scored a hit with his first shot and the radio crackled with hoarse cheers. A T-34 went up in a sudden ball of flame.

"Christ on a crutch – and another!" Schulze yelled over the intercom, as a squat shape was suddenly arrested and a trailer of inky smoke started to rise from it, staining the glittering summer sky. The Popov crew bailed out, to fold instantly, as the machine gun bullets hit them.

The Soviet commander – he had to be a general officer with so many vehicles under his command – reacted at once. Leaving a dozen T-34s to swing round and slug it out, glacis to glacis with the 3rd, he increased the speed of the rest of his formation. They streaked forward at fifty kilometres an hour, bouncing up and down over the steppe on their excellent Christie suspension, firing as they did so. The distance between them and the waiting

Wotan narrowed. Five hundred... four hundred... three hundred and fifty... three hundred metres.

"Surely, we've got to open fire –" von Dodenburg began.

The Vulture's voice cut in coldly, the emotional note gone now. It was as if he were giving orders on some peacetime range outside Berlin. "We're going into the hull down position now, von Dodenburg. Engage them at will. Ensure they don't outflank you–" The rest was drowned by the metallic buffeting of two AP shells striking their glacis plate and zooming off again at a forty-five degree angle.

"Fire!" von Dodenburg roared.

The 88 erupted with a thick crump. The Tiger shuddered and the breech came racing back to eject the smoking yellow shell-case. To their immediate front, the T-34 which had hit them, came to an abrupt stop. Nothing happened. No one bailed out. There was no flame. Nothing. But the Popov tank neither moved nor fired again.

"Damn fine shot, Schulze!" von Dodenburg yelled exuberantly. "Let's have more of the same." He rammed home another gleaming shell.

Schulze needed no urging. The T-34s were coming in at the six lone Tigers from all sides now. The sweat pouring down his back, staining his shirt back, he pumped shell after shell into the attackers. Von Dodenburg flung a glance at the shell bins. They were emptying fast. The floor was covered with empty shell cases. But they dare not let up. Once they did, the Soviets would come in for the kill. Now their immediate front was littered with burning Soviet tanks, their crews sprawled out in the blackened grass or hanging dead from the turrets. But there seemed no end to them, and they were oblivious to their tremendous losses. The first Tiger bought it, outflanked by a T-34 which had sneaked to the flank under the cover of smoke and hit it in the rear sprocket.

"Close up!" von Dodenburg screamed over the radio. "Close up, sod you... Do you want the bastards to get in among us!"

Hurriedly the two Tigers holding the flanks reversed closer to the remaining three. Too late! Three T-34s pounced on the Tiger to the left. 76-mm shells smashed into its side. It heeled as if it had been struck by the great wind. Metal lava erupted from its side. A tongue of flame licked lazily around the engine cowling followed by thick white smoke. But von Dodenburg had no further time for the stricken Tiger. The Russian commander had spotted his chance. Five further T-34s broke away from the

main body and roared in after the three which had knocked out the flank Tiger.

"Everybody – everybody!" von Dodenburg yelled frantically. "Concentrate on those T-34s to the left. Fire!"

Schulze, good soldier that he was, reacted first. He pumped three quick shots at the advancing T-34s. One went wild, but the other two hit their targets. Down below Hartmann pressed the trigger of his machine gun. The Popov crews were cut down before they'd gone five metres. But the remaining six came rattling on, heading straight into the flank of von Dodenburg's formation. Another Tiger was hit and disappeared in a spectacular ball of crazy orange flame. The shell must have hit the ammunition bin.

Von Dodenburg was no longer afraid, just angry. He had never been so angry in his whole life before: angry with the Popovs, his inexperienced crews, the war, himself. "Hartmann," he yelled over the intercom. "We will advance!"

'What!" the ex-legionnaire roared back.

"You heard me – or have you been eating big beans! We will advance!"

"But Captain–"

"If you don't move this metal bitch in one second, I'll blow your shitty brains out and move it myself! March or croak! All right, you'd better march!" Hartmann marched.

***

The dispatch rider slewed his dust-covered bike round dramatically and let it drop to the steppe behind the Vulture's Tigers, waiting for the Soviet attack to swamp them. Doubled low, he pelted towards the command vehicle. With the butt of his Schmeisser he hammered at the metal while the first Soviet ranging shells whizzed over his head.

"Open up!" he screamed with fear as they came ever closer. "Open up the crappy lid, won't you!"

Finally his hammering was heard. The Vulture poked his head out. Metzger's followed.

"What's the matter?" the Vulture yelled.

The DR cupped his hands around his mouth against the mounting thunder of the guns. "Dispatch from division, sir!" he cried, his eyes fixed on

the Soviet tanks getting ever closer. "Here." He thrust the message into the Vulture's hands.

Hastily the Vulture read through it. "Good. Give me the message form."

Swiftly the Vulture scribbled a few words, while the Soviet shells began to creep towards them and the tank gunners started to adjust their range.

"There. See that gets to the General."

The DR snatched the message. "Yessir," he yelled and dropped off the deck. Crouched low, he doubled back to his bike and kicked it back into noisy life. The next instant he was off in a tremendous cloud of dust, as if the whole of the Red Army were after him. The Vulture chuckled, pleased with the message.

"What is it, sir?" Metzger asked anxiously, his eyes flicking continually to the advancing Soviet monsters.

"We shall live to fight another day, Metzger. We have been ordered to withdraw immediately."

"Thank God for that, sir," Metzger said with an overwhelming sense of relief.

"Yes, at least I'll still be in the running for those general's stars. Those fat-arsed base stallions won't get all the promotion that comes out of this war. Now, Metzger, get your head out of the way. Let's button up before those Popovs knock it off."

Swiftly he dropped inside the cupola and picked up the mike.

"Make smoke," the CO yelled over the radio. "Make smoke and move out. Now!"

The frightened young tank commanders needed no urging. The Popovs were almost upon them now. All along their line the black smoke containers hissed into the air and burst over their turrets with soft plops. Engines sprang into life. Hastily the drivers flung the tanks into reverse. The sixty-ton monsters backed out of the hollow, firing as they went.

***

The Tiger bounced and came to a sudden stop. Down below Hartmann screamed like a woman.

"Deschner," – he meant the co-driver – "he's been hit, sir. The top of his head has come off!"

For a moment von Dodenburg did not seem to digest the news. His head was ringing like a metal bell and the turret was filled with a strange echoing sound that would not die. Then he saw the thick white smoke which had started to stream up from below. Suddenly the turret was filled with acrid choking fumes.

He shook his head violently and yelled, "Bail out... she's going to blow!"

There was another devastating explosion close by. The stricken Tiger rocked violently. The T-34s were confident now. They had crippled the German; they were coming in for the kill. Von Dodenburg, crouched and blinking in the biting smoke, peered inside the driving compartment.

Deschner was sitting upright in his seat still, his hand clasped on the machine gun handle, as if he were just about to fire it. But his head was absent. It lay on the littered deck, the radio earphones still attached, grinning up at him. Sickened, von Dodenburg swung himself up again. There was nothing they could do for Deschner – and Hartmann had already bailed out.

"All right, Schulze," he yelled, as the first flames started to lick up around his feet. "Get out of here – quick!"

Heavy smoke was everywhere, obscuring everything, pouring a putrid smother over their own stricken Tiger. Pressing his body close to the turret ring, he rolled over it, out and dropped onto the steppe. On the other side Schulze did the same. The blast buffeted him across the face. Somewhere close by a Russian machine gun chattered. Tracer zipped past him. He struggled to his feet. He felt unutterably weary. All he wanted to do was to lie down on the churned earth, close his eyes and drift into sleep, forgetting the tragedy that had struck his company.

Schulze loomed up out of the smoke, his face black and bleeding from a nasty gash over the right eye. Hartmann followed, his helmet off, struggling with his pistol belt. Finally he got the buckle undone and threw it down with a gesture of contempt.

"What's that for, Hartmann?" von Dodenburg asked shakily.

"I've had enough. I'm buggering off," Hartmann snarled and ducked as another shell exploded close by.

Von Dodenburg wiped the dirt off his face and stared. at Hartmann open-mouthed. "What did you say?" he asked finally.

"You heard... I'm buggering off. We're all buggering off."

"But you can't do that! That's desertion in the face of the enemy," he

protested wildly. "They'll stand you up against a wall for that."

In his sudden anger, von Dodenburg did not notice the quick wink Hartmann gave Schulze. "They can have their sodding war, Captain," Hartmann said, while Schulze moved behind the shocked young officer. "We've had it! Don't you see?" The ex-legionnaire's eyes bulged from his head with rage. "Germany's lost the shitting war. The fucking Popovs have beaten us. Now it's everybody for himself. And if you were smart, Captain, you'd do the same."

Frantically von Dodenburg fumbled for his pistol. "Hartmann," he rapped above the noise of the Soviet advance, which was now sweeping towards the Vulture's positions, "you must be out of your head! This is only one battle. Germany isn't finished by a long chalk. Christ, man, how the devil can you talk such–"

Captain von Dodenburg never finished the sentence. What felt like a brick wall fell on the back of his head. The burning horizon tilted, righted itself, then tilted again. His eyes swung upwards, suddenly sightless. He gasped harshly as his legs splayed out from beneath him and he blacked out...

***

On the hilltop overlooking the battlefield, General Rotmistrov lowered his binoculars and rubbed the circles they had made on his cheeks. Beside him the squat politico looked a moment longer at the retreating Germans before doing the same.

"The Fritzes are running," he said slowly, almost as if he had to convince himself that what he had just seen was no illusion.

"You said they would, Comrade Khrushchev," Rotmistrov said.

The Ukrainian grinned. "I know, but I didn't quite believe myself, then, Comrade General," he answered.

Rotmistrov smiled in spite of his dislike of the other man. On this great day, he could not be angry with him even though he was always interfering in matters which were the concern of the Stavka alone. "And now Comrade Khrushchev – what now?"

Khrushchev flung out a pudgy, dirty-nailed hand in the direction of Wotan's fleeing tanks. The survivors had broken through their own smoke-screen and were clattering off to the west at top speed.

"We march, Comrade General – we march to the west," he exclaimed.

"And our objective?"

"The objective," the future dictator repeated the question thoughtfully. "The objective, General Rotmistrov. That is simple. It is Berlin."

BOOK 4 – THE YANKS ARE COMING

"Amis everywhere! They must breed like shitting rabbits in the United States of shitting America!"

SS Man Schulze to Major von Dodenburg. Sept 20th, 1943

CHAPTER 16

The camouflaged Opel Wanderer which had driven him from Aeroporto dell' Uba stopped to let the column of undersized, black-shirted Militia shuffle by, the white dust powdering their shabby boots. They were singing:

"Tutto le sere, sotto quel fanal
presso la caserne...
Con ti Lili Marlene
con ti Lili Marlene..."

But there was no enthusiasm in their liquid Italian voices, just cynicism and war weariness. The big tough para guarding the HQ spat in the dust as they passed, his contempt for their Italian allies unconcealed.

"Sodding macaronis," he grunted as von Dodenburg got out of the staff car. Then he recognised the major's stars and the death's head badge on the cap, which surmounted von Dodenburg's bandaged head. He snapped to attention. "Good morning sir," he bellowed, as if he were on parade.

Carefully Major von Dodenburg touched his hand to his cap. "Good morning, Corporal. I wonder if you can help me?"

The para clicked to attention again, his rubber-soled jumpboots making a very unsatisfactory sound on the burning hot asphalt.

"Sir!"

"I'm looking for the HQ of SS Assault Battalion Wotan."

"You mean Battle Group Wotan, sir," the broken-nosed para corrected him. "Oh, that's across the square and down that side-street, past the Eyetie knocking shops – oh, excuse me, sir. I mean the Italian brothels, sir."

Von Dodenburg smiled a little wearily. "I know what a knocking shop is, Corporal. Thank you." He touched his hand to his cap again and keeping to the shade he went in the direction indicated by the para.

"Shifty SS," the corporal muttered behind his back and made an obscene gesture with his middle finger. "Arrogant bastards – think the sun shines out of their arseholes!"

***

Slowly, feeling the sweat trickling down the small of his back in the September heat, von Dodenburg made his way towards the Wotan's new headquarters. The paras of General Kurt Student's Airborne Corps were digging in everywhere. Obviously, von Dodenburg told himself, they were expecting trouble. Even if the Amis didn't drop paratroops on Rome, there was a damn good chance that the Italians would break out of the *Pact of Steel* and start fighting their former allies. Whatever happened, he thought as he reached the blessed shade of the entrance to Wotan's HQ and showed his pass to the SS sentry, Wotan would be in action soon even if the Amis were still crawling up Italy like a lazy bug on a boot.

Metzger, dressed in summer uniform, clicked to attention when he saw von Dodenburg. "Major von Dodenburg, sir. Glad to see you again, sir."

"Thank you, Metzger." The officer's eye fell on the new decoration on the NCO's burly chest. "Wound medal in silver, eh?"

"Sir!" Metzger bellowed. He raised his right hand to reveal that it was clad in a black glove." The Ivans did for me, sir. The bone-menders said that I'd never be able to use it again."

Von Dodenburg clicked his tongue sympathetically. "Sorry about that, Metzger."

"No matter, sir," Metzger answered with false modesty. "I'm one of the lucky ones. Just got to soldier on – that's all. Especially now when everybody's against us."

Von Dodenburg nodded. "Yes, you're right – we've all got to soldier on now. But do you think I could see the CO."

"Of course, sir. But I'd better just check."

Metzger turned and knocked very loudly on the inner door. He waited for what seemed a very long time, then stuck his head round the door carefully.

"Major von Dodenburg, sir," he snapped.

"Let him come in a moment, Metzger," the Vulture's familiar voice rasped from within.

A moment later a small and feminine young second-lieutenant in the Alpini came out of the inner office. In spite of the terrible heat, he had his greatcoat draped decoratively over his shoulders. He inclined his gleaming black head in von Dodenburg's direction.

"Chiaou," he muttered, flashing the German a tremendous white smile,

and leaving behind him an overpowering odour of cologne.

"Who the hell is that?" von Dodenburg asked.

Metzger sniffed. "That spaghetti-eater seems to have six more teeth than anybody else I know," he grunted, but he did not enlighten von Dodenburg any further.

The Vulture rose immediately when von Dodenburg went in. His face seemed a little flushed and he was tugging at his jacket, as if something had just disarranged it.

"My dear von Dodenburg, how good to see you again –and congratulations on your promotion."

"Thank you, sir."

"And how's your head?"

"Getting better, the bone-menders say. But God knows how I got hit there. I was wearing my helmet after all."

The Vulture offered him a seat. "Good job, you did. Apparently your tank bought it almost immediately, according to Schulze and the other chap who got you out. A minute later, my dear von Dodenburg, and you would not have got your promotion."

"And Sergeant Schulze, what of him?"

"He seemed to have been badly wounded. He was bleeding severely at least when he brought you in. They bundled the lot of you in the ambulance and rushed you off to the rear." He shrugged and fumbled with his flies which von Dodenburg noted were undone. "He's probably in some damn base hospital, trying to get the bone-menders to release him. And just now, von Dodenburg, I can use every experienced NCO and officer I can lay my hands on, if I'm going to get this battle group on its feet before the Amis reach Rome." He paused for a moment. "Schwarz is back now by the way, though he has to report to Number Two Ospedale Militaire every day. They're fitting him up there with the arm. Luckily enough the Popovs shot off his left arm. Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to take him back."

"Yes, lucky for him," von Dodenburg said ironically.

"Schwarz'll be my adjutant. It'll be good to have him at my side because we're expanding very fast. As for you von Dodenburg, I'd like you to take over the Panzer Grenadier battalion in the Battle Group."

"Thank you, sir. If we go on like this, we'll be a division before we know where we are," von Dodenburg added with a laugh. But the Vulture did not return his laugh. He was deadly serious.

"That is exactly my plan, von Dodenburg. Now listen to what we're going to do..."

***

What followed was a race against time. The Allies landed at Salerno. Mussolini, the deposed Italian dictator, was found and rescued from his Italian captors by the paras and an unknown SD man named Skorzeny. The *Pact of Steel* fell apart and in Rome the paras went into action against their one-time Allies. The Amis broke out of their Salerno bridgehead and drove for Naples. But otherwise events, as tremendous as they were, went unnoticed by the Vulture and his tiny staff.

One night the CO got the young captain commanding the paras guarding the HQ area drunk. The man had gained his jump wings back in 1941, but he still had to make his first combat jump. The Vulture worked on him all night. The next morning the disgruntled young para volunteered himself and his whole company for Battle Group Wotan.

With the aid of the beautiful young Lieutenant from the Alpini, the Vulture organised a squad to steal the demonstration company of Tigers which had been loaned to the Alpini at their training ground just outside Rome. Suddenly one morning, the men of Wotan woke up to find they were the possessors of ten brand-new Tigers, over which their officers sweated in the first rays of the sun to remove the Italian markings.

Schwarz was flown to the Wehrmacht's main military prison at Torgau and brought back with him half a company of 'volunteers' who preferred Wotan to the grim glasshouse and the possibility of a transfer to Penal Battalion 999. After the first deserter had been brought back and shot publicly by the Vulture himself, the *Torgau Volunteers* settled down and attempted to soldier.

Von Dodenburg himself drove into the mountainous area around the northern city of Bolzano and brought back half a hundred big, rawboned Tyrolean farm boys who were officially Italian citizens, but who were as German as the Führer himself – although von Dodenburg could not understand a word they said when they spoke their own native dialect.

***

The new Battle Group took shape rapidly, though as Metzger was heard complaining more often than once, "they're like the crappy Foreign Legion plus the crappy glasshouse cast-offs!" And indeed *they were a very tough bunch*, von Dodenburg thought as he watched them on the morning parades, very unlike the enthusiastic, idealistic young men who had flocked to the Wotan's standard in 1939. These men – paras, military criminals and veterans of the Citadel fiasco – had no illusions, no beliefs and no loyalty save to themselves and Battle Group Wotan.

"My dear von Dodenburg," the Vulture commented on one such morning as they marched off for training, "to borrow a phrase from that Tommy general who helped our own Marshal Blücher to win the Battle of Waterloo, I don't know whether they'll frighten the enemy, but by God, they put the wind up me."

Von Dodenburg had grinned. They 'put the wind up' him, too. But time was running out. All further recruiting stopped as did all training. The Battle Group went on Stage Two Alert. Hastily those of the new recruits who could drive or knew how to fire a cannon were placed in the Group's armoured component to fill the gaps in the Tiger crews; the rest were put into von Dodenburg's panzer grenadiers. As the Vulture remarked, tugging at the end of his great nose cynically, "They'll train themselves after all. The ones who survive will be trained, and the ones who get their silly heads blown off will serve as an example to the others that it pays to learn one's job well in the SS."

The younger officer was forced to agree: the situation in Southern Italy was far too serious to be worried about such trivia as training. The front could break down at any moment.

"Besides," the Vulture added, "everyone knows that the Amis and the Tommies can't fight. Kill their officers and they run around in panic like chickens with their heads chopped off. After all it is common knowledge that the Anglo-Americans show very little initiative."

***

But in spite of the weakness of the Battle Group's training, von Dodenburg worked flat out to ensure that his panzer grenadiers had the best possible equipment, returning to his billet at night blind with fatigue or when he couldn't sleep because of excessive fatigue, drinking himself into insensibility

with one of the whores in the officers' brothel in the Mario di Fiori red light district.

On the day that the Tommy 8th Army joined up with the Amis east of Eboli and commenced the last phase of their attack on Naples, the Vulture assembled the Battle Group and told them they would be moving out to meet the enemy the following morning. Von Dodenburg flashed a look down the grey-clad ranks of his own panzer grenadiers. There seemed no reaction to the news. Most of the new recruits were still hungover from the night before's drinking bout and the clean-living farmboys from the Tyrol probably hadn't understood a word the Vulture had spoken in his clipped Prussian accent. Even if they had, he told himself with a faint grin, it would take another thirty minutes before the news penetrated their thick mountain brains.

The Vulture standing on an ammunition box in the centre of the ancient barracks square, surrounded by fine, florid Italian baroque buildings, squeezed in his monocle more firmly, and rasped, "The morning will be devoted to packing the gear. The rest of the day is yours – and the night." He smiled thinly, but there was no response from the Group.

Out of the corner of his eye, von Dodenburg caught a glimpse of bright canary yellow. The Alpini Lieutenant's flashy Fiat sports car slid into the shade of the fine tall cypresses which bordered one side of the square. He waved lazily at the Vulture. The Vulture flushed lightly and went on faster: "You may do as you wish. Two things, however – don't get the pox. I shall regard that as a court-martial offence and I don't need to tell you how self-inflicted wounds are punished in the present crisis. The other is – be back at zero six hundred hours, ready to march." He grinned suddenly. "Good hunting – and good shooting tonight. Dismiss!"

As Metzger supervised the march-off, von Dodenburg attempted to ask the Vulture for his orders for the day. But the CO had no time. His eyes were fixed strangely on the, beautiful young officer waiting for him in the bright yellow car.

"Lothario is there," he said thickly, "and time is so short –so damnably short." He strode off hurriedly, calling over his shoulder. "If you have any questions, ask Schwarz!"

Thoughtfully von Dodenburg walked over to Schwarz. He looked at him significantly, but there was nothing but madness in his red eyes.

"Well, Schwarz," he said. "If the CO can do it, so can we. What about a drink and then the Mario di Fiori."

"Anything you say, von Dodenburg." He slapped his wooden hand against his pistol holster. "As long as we are armed – one can't trust these Italians."

Von Dodenburg laughed. "I'm always armed, Schwarz, when I go into the Mario di Fiori, but a little differently than you think."

On the way to their quarters they met Metzger. He flung them a magnificent salute, his right-hand jacket pocket bulging with worthless Lire notes for the girls in the red-light district. "Permission to dismiss, sir?" he roared in his best sergeant-major fashion.

Von Dodenburg looked at him in mock severity. "Dismiss, Sergeant Metzger! A good NCO is never off duty, especially in the Wotan. You can take over the Group office for the day. After all you'll be on a cushy number after today as a virtual non-combatant." He indicated Metzger's gloved right hand. Metzger flushed, but said nothing. When they were safely out of earshot, however, he cursed thickly.

"Officers, I've shit em! A lot of pimps, poufs and pissing buck-passers; that's all the bastards are." And with that he passed inside to give the duty clerks hell for the rest of that long September day.

***

The Mario di Fiori was doing booming business. Heavy-breasted, dark-eyed Italian whores with lazy hips and their skinny pimps in their uniform pin-striped suits were importuning the men in field-grey everywhere, as they wandered up and down the cobbled, grass-overgrown streets looking for adventure. Here and there there were long impatient queues of soldiers outside the official army brothels, which had been reserved for the Italian Army and which still charged the same low prices.

Just opposite there were equally long queues, supervised by hard-faced, suspicious-eyed chain dogs: men waiting to carry out the prescribed anti-VD treatment after having visited the whores, standing like so many animals at long zinc troughs to squirt wine-red potassium permanganate mixture into their penises to kill any possible infection.

The two SS officers swaggered through the waiting men, as if they were not there, and although the 'stubble-hoppers' grumbled, they got out of the way swiftly enough.

"What I fancy," von Dodenburg was just saying, "is a nice little blonde

– neat and trim and not too hefty like these Italian women," when they swung round the corner and bumped into the crowd of private soldiers, grouped round the women. Von Dodenburg broke off suddenly and gasped. He had rarely seen uglier women than the three who were the centre of the crowd. The first one was little more than a dwarf, her face as pale as death and her dark hair cropped, as if she had just escaped from a nunnery; the second was enormously fat and cross-eyed; whilst the third was a head taller than himself and had an enormous lump growing out of her right temple like a bullock's horn.

But it wasn't the three women who kept his attention; it was the voice of the man who was obviously their pimp. The man, dressed in rough civilian clothes, had his back to them as he praised the sexual talents of his three 'mares', as he kept calling them to the laughing soldiers. But there was no mistaking that cheeky waterfront voice.

"I calls them Faith, Hope and Charity," he was saying. "The little short-arsed one here, she's Faith because she doesn't spread them for money. No, not at all! She's more a – you might say – charitable institution – she wants your green leaves so that you won't spend it on the demon drink. She gives it to the Pope – personally! As for Hope here, the one with the four-eyes – you know you could put yer head between them knockers on her and think you was deaf – she's hoping that a real man will come along one of these days who's got a whanger big enough to get close to her and give her a real thrill." He lowered his voice confidentially. "You wouldn't believe it, but it's true – she's still a virgin!"

"Schulze!" von Dodenburg bellowed, finding his voice at last.

The pimp swung round as if he had been shot, his forefinger still raised in praise of his 'mares'. The ruddiness had gone from his face and he had a fresh, livid scar over his right eye, but there was no mistaking him. It was Schulze all right.

His mouth dropped open as he muttered, "Great crap on the Christmas Tree, it's Captain von Dodenburg..."

***

Schwarz had departed upstairs with Faith. Schulze took a deep swig at his red wine and then licking his suddenly dry lips launched into his story.

"You see it was like this, sir. By the way congratulations on your

promotion –"

"Get on with it, Schulze," von Dodenburg interrupted threateningly. "None of your soft soap."

"Well, we'd rescued you from the Tiger, with that nasty bang on the head you got. As soon as we managed to get you to a dressing station, they decided to keep us too. We were both hit, me and Hartmann. And a couple of twenty rouble pieces didn't hurt either. So all three of us was whipped on the Red Cross train to Lvov General Hospital."

"That's where I woke up," Von Dodenburg said. Above his head the springs of Faith's bed were creaking mightily. "But you weren't there. Nor Hartmann."

"No, sir, well you see we decided that we might get cured quicker and return sooner to the Battalion if we received treatment in the Reich. You know how it is? Anyway we got to Munich and we sort of decided there that we should go south. A doctor we got to know at the military hospital in Schwabing said the air would heal our wounds sooner in Austria and we did want to get back to the Battalion. He signed the paper assigning us to the hospital at Bad Ischl. And then we was out for a walk one day, we must have missed our way and there we were in spaghetti-land. Of course, we wanted to come straight back. But we thought one day more or less wouldn't do any harm. I always heard that Italy's a great place for culture. Didn't Schiller come down here or something?" He looked at von Dodenburg inquiringly.

"Goethe," the officer corrected.

"Well, I knew it was one of them singers a long time back. So we thought what was good enough for them was good enough for us." Above them the squeaking of the rusty bedsprings had stopped, but little bits of plaster were still drifting down on their heads.

"Well, go on," von Dodenburg prompted. "How did your excursion into culture land you in your present – er – business?" He pointed a finger upwards.

"It was Hartmann, sir. The bastard, if you'll forgive the expression? He wanted to look at the boats at Genoa."

"You mean you two rogues wanted to desert!"

"I wouldn't put it as drastic as that, sir. It was just that we thought a trip to Spain or somewhere like that would speed up our recovery. All we had in mind was getting back to the mob as soon as possible. Well, at least that's what I had in mind. It was different with Hartmann."

"How?"

Schulze touched the new scar on his forehead. "The same night that we made contact with a Spanish skipper, the bastard whopped me on the head. I was unconscious for twelve hours. When I woke up, he was gone and the roubles too."

"Well, why didn't you report to the nearest military police post?" von Dodenburg asked sharply.

"I was ashamed, sir," Schulze said and hung his head. "After all, I'd been trying all along to get cured so that I could get back to my unit and now here I was with my head bashed in again, no use to anybody."

Von Dodenburg could hear Schwarz's heavy boots coming down the rickety stairs; he had to make a decision fast. "All right, Schulze – SS Man Schulze – I'll say no more about your desertion. You'll lose your rank and return as a common soldier. Wotan is full of rogues now, one more won't make any difference, I suppose."

Schulze raised his head. His light blue eyes were sparkling, as of old.

"You won't regret it, sir," he said enthusiastically.

"I know, I won't, Schulze. The next time it'll be the firing squad. Now get rid of those mares of yours and report back to the Battalion at once. I'm sure Sergeant Metzger will be pleased to see you again."

"Just one request, sir, before I go."

"What?" von Dodenburg asked impatiently.

"Well, sir." Schulze was suddenly hesitant. "The girls have done well by me this last month. I don't think it would be right just to leave them like that. I mean it wouldn't, would it?"

"Get on with it, man!"

"Well, I think I ought to slip them a last link. Not Faith because she'll still have wet decks from Captain Schwarz. But the other two – Hope and Charity. I mean, sir, they love me."

Major von Dodenburg exploded. "Schulze, you're an impossible rogue. Get back to those bloody barracks before I change my mind and have you shot here and now!"

***

Naples was burning. Somewhere miles out to sea the great enemy battleships pounded the Italian port with their massive sixteen inch guns. They couldn't

see them, but every time the Amis fired, the horizon erupted in a series of volcanoes. They were supported by flight after flight of twin-engined Mitchells which dropped tons of bombs on even the smallest hamlet bordering Highway Six, the vital road leading north to Cassino and from thence to Rome.

But Battle Group Wotan was well dug in. Von Dodenburg's panzer grenadiers were scattered on both sides of the highway as it straightened and began to run towards the bridge across the River Volturno, while the Vulture's Tigers were carefully concealed, hull-down, on the right bank of the river itself. When the Amis finally took the crossroads up ahead and began to roll north again, they would be in for a great surprise.

The first stubble-hopper from one of the scratch infantry battalions defending the highway came tearing up, his eyes wide, staring and crazed with fear. He burst through their foxholes, crying, "They're coming... They're coming, thousands of them!"

They didn't attempt to stop him. He was a broken man, no use to them. Besides the chain dogs had thrown a barricade across the road beyond the bridge to stop people like the panic-stricken stubble-hopper. They would shoot him without trial as an example to those who would undoubtedly follow. And they did. A good half hundred of them, their arms flailing wildly as they fought to make their escape, throwing away their weapons in their blind panic. Again the panzer grenadiers, crouched pale-faced and tense in their coffin-like holes, let them run by without hindrance. One of the ex-paras spat drily and remarked contemptuously, "Typical Greater German infantry – the first enemy shell and they wet their field-grey knickers."

Five minutes later the Ami artillery bombardment swamped them. It seemed the Amis had an inexhaustible supply of shells. They worked over the whole area beyond the cross-roads, switching their fire back and forth suddenly, as if the fire-control officers were hoping to catch the enemy in the opening. But they didn't. Von Dodenburg's panzer grenadiers were cowering deep inside their narrow pits, tense bodies pulled into the foetal position, as the red-hot shrapnel hissed harmlessly over them.

At last it stopped. Cautiously they peered over the edges of their pits. The landscape in front of them had been transformed, as if a hundred gigantic moles had been at work in a sudden frenzy of digging. Anxiously von Dodenburg asked for casualties. With relief he heard that they only amounted to six and ten wounded.

"Put the dead in one of the shell holes and send the walking wounded back to Group HQ," he ordered and settled down to wait again at Schulze's side, as he crouched there over his Spandau.

Time passed leadenly. To their front all was silent. Nothing moved save for the smoke streaming straight upwards into the blue Italian sky from the burning crossroads.

'Think the Amis must have gone back home for a bit to eat and one of them milk shakes they were always drinking in the pictures before the war," Schulze said and wiped the sweat off his face.

"It's a nice thought, Schulze, but somehow I think the gentlemen from America will be paying us a visit before this day is much older."

"Could be," Schulze said morosely. "Could be." Then his big face brightened. "Did I ever tell you the joke about the bras they issue to the 'field mattresses', sir?"

"No," von Dodenburg said, not taking his eyes off the wide valley of the Volturno in front of him. "No, I don't believe you ever did, Schulze."

"Well, sir. There are five sizes – small, medium, large. Then there's – wow, holy God!" He paused dramatically for the punch line. "And then, there's – my aching back–"

"Shut up!" von Dodenburg snapped. "Here they come!" He raised his voice. "Pass the word – stand to your weapons everybody! The gentlemen from America are here."

As his panzer grenadiers fumbled with their weapons and took aim, von Dodenburg watched the first khaki-clad figures emerge cautiously from the burning crossroads, their rifles held defensively across their chests, walking on the balls of their feet fearfully, as if they expected a slug to whack into their soft flesh at any moment. They would be the scouts, he decided. The handful clambered up the embankment onto the white, pitted road and began to advance up it warily. Now more and more Amis came into view behind them. Suddenly the fields and olive groves on both sides filled with plodding cautious khaki figures. Even more of them. Scores, hundreds, thousands. They were so thick on the shattered ground that they formed almost solid lines.

"Holy shit!" Schulze breathed at his side, as he lifted his Spandau, adjusted the long belt of ammunition and then tucked the wooden butt firmly into his shoulder. "There must be thousands of the bastards! Amis everywhere. They must breed like shitting rabbits in the United States of

shitting America!"

Von Dodenburg did not comment. All of a sudden he felt old. There had been many other moments just like this in the past four years: first the Belgies, then the Frogs. After them the Tommies and the Popovs. Now the new boys – the Amis.

Breed like shitting rabbits, Schulze had said. It seemed like that. As if all over the world, hatred and envy of Germany spawned new enemies. Kill them as they might, there were always fresh enemies to take the place of the dead ones. He was seized by an irrepressible desire to see the faces of these new enemies, who had come nearly five thousand kilometres to be slaughtered on this hot Italian plain. He lifted his binoculars and focused them on the first line of American infantry, sweeping the glass along their faces.

They were fresh, well-fed and unlined. Most of them were young, and one or two of them appeared to be laughing or joking, as if the advance were a walk-over, a simple stroll under the bright Italian sun; as if their real war would be fought by machines and not human beings. He stared transfixed at them. They were the faces of innocence, still untouched by the compromise, the brutalities, the horrors of total war. They made him feel very old – and very angry.

He dropped his binoculars. With a bound he sprang onto the top of the foxhole so that his men could see him clearly. He raised his hand in signal. The panzer grenadiers – criminals, paras, mountain boys and veterans – squinted through their sights at the carelessly advancing Amis.

"Welcome to Europe – Americans!" von Dodenburg screamed with rage. He brought his hand down sharply.

Schulze squeezed the trigger of his Spandau. With a jolting high-pitched scream it burst into deadly life. White-and-red tracer zipped across the valley. The next instant the rest of the panzer grenadier line erupted. Lead cut the air. Amis began dropping, faces contorted with horror, pain and surprise. Wotan's new battle with a new enemy had commenced.

– THE END –

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STORMTROOP EDELWEISS – CHAPTER 1

The little Yak observation plane made its third circuit.

Sitting next to the pilot, the officer in the earth-coloured, loose blouse of the Soviet Alpine Corps saw a thick wood of tall trees below, with scores of well camouflaged tents carefully dispersed among them. Beyond the wood there was the steppe, still winter-bleached and criss-crossed with tank tracks. And on the white ribbons of dusty roads, there were scenes of intense activity. There were field-grey columns everywhere, heading for the mountains, with long slow convoys of tanks and trucks lumbering up behind them. The young officer bit his bottom lip in dismay.

The pilot, a cocky black-haired, swarthy-skinned Georgian, caught the look. "Yes, comrade, the sons-of-whores are advancing again. And you don't need to be Old Leather Face to know where they're heading for."

The Alpine Corps officer ignored the disrespectful description of Marshal Stalin as 'Old Leather Face', though he told himself it wouldn't be long before the NKVD had the pilot in their cellars if he kept on talking like he did.

"Yes, I know, Comrade Lieutenant. They're after the Caucasus and our oil," he said.

The pilot nodded his head sagely and concentrated on finishing their third circle before levelling out. "Now what?" he asked, casually ignoring the lazy white tracers which started to curve their way towards them, gathering speed at every moment. "Do I make another run over the Fritzes?"

The observer, his mind still full of the new German threat to his Motherland, grunted, "No, Comrade. Now we fly to the mountain."

The pilot shrugged. "*Horoscho*, comrade. But be prepared to get out and begin walking on air, if this old crate's wings fall off at that height."

The observer didn't even deign to answer.

The observer pressed his handsome tanned young face closer to the window and gazed down. Now the little Yak was flying over high, rugged country, the naked rock a deep brown against the patches of snow. Here and there, rough country tracks were visible, scratched into rocky hillsides at impossible angles, but roads were few and far between, as he already knew from his

study of the maps before he had set out on this reconnaissance mission. He strained his neck and caught a glimpse of a long column of labouring camels, plodding up a steep track.

The pilot grinned, amused. "Something out of the Middle Ages," he commented. "You wouldn't think we were in the middle of a total war, would you?"

"No; the observer answered, his keen eyes searching a cluster of stone and wooden buildings below, for any sign of life. There was none – the village was abandoned, and he could guess why. The only vegetation up here in the mountains was an occasional patch of withered scrub or gorse, bent at a forty-five degree angle by the tearing wind. The only people who lived in the mountains were the damned *Karatski* – and everybody knew that they were bandits.

The interior of the little plane started to grow lighter. They were out of the overcast and above the snow line. From below and above there was the glare of sun and snow. The pilot flipped his sunglasses over his eyes and the smile vanished from his face, as he concentrated on gaining height.

It was a brilliant spring day now. All around the snow-capped peaks shone in the hard yellow sun with a blinding clarity. The observer felt his heart leap. In the good old days before the German invasion it had always been his dream to come here and climb. He knew that the Caucasus Mountains weren't always like this: calm, clear, brilliant. Sometimes the rocks would be as slimy as seaweed with dripping mist, with the wind shrieking like ten thousand banshees, trying with in visible hands to throw the climber off the mountainside. The mountains were like a glorious battlefield, he realized that, illumined by scenes of human treachery, but also of human heroism.

"Comrade, there she is!" the pilot cut into the observer's reverie, the muscles standing out on his dark hairy arms, as he fought the Yak ever upwards, its radial engine protesting at the effort.

"Elbrus!" the observer said reverently and gazed in awe at the great mountain's twin peaks, pink and white against the brilliant hard blue sky.

"Look like a couple of tiny tits, don't they?" the pilot gasped irreverently. "We Georgians like our women bigger than that."

The observer ignored the pilot's comment. Little did he know that the highest mountain in the Caucasus range had been called the Elbrus – the Breast – by some long-vanished people because it resembled the female

bosom. Instead, the observer hurriedly took out his binoculars and started to sweep the range from west to east. But the great field of glittering snow was empty. He adjusted the focus and directed his gaze at the west peak, the higher of the two. Metre by metre, he searched its surface, looking for the signs that they had been there, while next to him the pilot, suddenly grim-faced and sweating, tried to hold the Yak steady in the thin mountain air.

Nothing! Not a sign of them. Ignoring the Yak's sudden upwards surge, the moment of suspension, followed by an abrupt sickening drop, the observer turned his attention to the east peak. Again he searched its surface, hardly hearing the spluttering protests of the overtaxed engine and the pilot's thick curses in his native Georgian. The east peak, at five and a half thousand metres, a hundred metres lower than the other, revealed nothing. They hadn't been there, either.

Satisfied, he slipped his binoculars back into their leather case. His mission was completed. "All right," he said expansively, "take her over now, Comrade Pilot."

The pilot, his thick black eyebrows gleaming now with beads of sweat, shot him a murderous look. "Holy Mother of Kazan," he cried above the spluttering roar of the radial engine. "have you had your hundred, man?" This wooden son-of-a-bitch couldn't cross those tits up there! Her wings would fold up like matchwood."

The observer from the Alpine Corps shrugged easily. "You're the mechanic, comrade," he said, deliberately omitting the 'pilot'. "Take her back any way you want."

The sweating pilot did not need a second invitation. While the observer sat back more comfortably in his leather seat, he swung the Yak round in a tight circle and grunted through gritted teeth, "All right, back over the Fritz lines and down the valley of the River Kuban. And let's hope the field-greys are not waiting for us this time."

"They won't be," the observer answered, with all the supreme confidence of youth. In an hour, we'll be home and you'll undoubtedly be filling your guts with fire."

But the young observer was wrong. There would be no more fiery *Gorilka* vodka for the pilot, and no more mountains for him to climb.

The Georgian was down to a thousand metres, flying through the canyon of the Kuban, when it happened. Behind him lay range after range of snow

mountains, as desolate as the surface of the moon. Before him lay the first twinkling pink lights of the front. Once he had crossed them he would be safe. Suddenly a sinister black object hissed at a tremendous speed across his front. He had just time to catch its black-and-white cross insignia, and his heart sank.

"Ass-shit!" he cursed. "A Fritz fighter!"

A moment later, even before he had thought of what evasive action he might take in the narrow valley, the Messerschmitt came roaring in, its engine howling. Its machine guns chattered crazily. Slugs thumped into the Yak's wooden fuselage. The observer screamed, his face a sudden mass of red gore, as he slammed against the side of the cockpit. Desperately the Georgian tried to swing the plane to the side. But the Messerschmitt pilot beat him to it. A burst of fire shattered his tail. He had been badly hit! The Georgian wrestled frantically with the controls. No good! The tail had gone. As the plane started to plummet to the rocky floor of the canyon, the German's final burst of machine gun fire struck the cockpit canopy squarely. It shattered into a crazy spider's web. Screaming with fear, blinded, blood pouring from his face, the pilot let go of the controls.

With a great rending, tearing crash, the little Yak struck the valley wall, echoing and re-echoing down the length of the chasm, as if it might go on for ever and ever...

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