

## A TRUE FRIEND

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France 1944.

The horizon swirled with the colors of red and orange as the sun slowly set in the distance. The beauty was in stark contrast to the smell of smoke and sulfa that filled the air, to the carnage that covered the ground.

Lieutenant Gil Hanley struggled through the dense forest with his charge. His sergeant, Chip Saunders, had been seriously wounded saving his life and Hanley was determined not to let him die. He would get Saunders the help he needed, even if it meant his own life.

They fought through the heavy undergrowth, heading for what only that morning had been the American lines. Hanley struggled to keep Saunders on his feet. It was becoming more difficult with each step. The man was barely conscious and losing blood fast.

The Lieutenant readjusted his hold on the wounded man's arm around his neck and pulled him up a little higher by his web belt. He knew Saunders couldn't go much further and they would have to stop soon.

The problem was they were still in German-occupied territory. They had already avoided several patrols, but each time they started up Saunders would start to bleed again. Hanley had to find someplace safe from the patrols. Someplace Saunders could remain still and quiet. Traveling could, and very likely would, cost the sergeant his life.

Saunders began to slip from his grasp again. Hanley laid the man in the cool grass under the shade of a tree. Turning him slightly on his side, he checked the bandage that covered the wound on Saunders' back. The dressing was soaked through again.

Hanley pulled the last bandage from his web belt and put it over the soaked dressing. Pulling the straps around the man's chest, he tied them tightly, hoping the bleeding would stop.

"Lieutenant."

Hanley heard Saunders' weak voice and laid him on his back.

"Lieutenant, you have to leave me. I won't make it much further. You need to get back to our lines and report that German advance. I'll only slow you down." Saunders closed his eyes against the pain, his breathing short and quick.

"I don't want to hear that Sergeant. We'll both get back to our lines. I'm not leaving you here alone."

Hanley took his canteen from his belt and lifted Saunders' head, giving him several small sips of water. He, too, was thirsty but their water supply was short and he had to keep Saunders from getting dehydrated.

"Lieutenant, I'm too big a risk to take with you. You have to get back." Saunders' voice was getting weaker and the pain caused him to keep his eyes shut.

"Look, all you need is some rest and you'll be able to make it back. First I need to find us a safe place to stay. Those Kraut patrols aren't about to give us a chance to rest unless we're under cover. I'm going to scout up ahead. I'll be back to get you in five minutes."

Hanley took off his jacket and folded it into a pillow, placing it under Saunders' head. He was walking away when he heard a very weak voice behind him.

"Don't come back, Lieutenant. I'm not worth it."

"You are to me." Hanley spoke under his breath as he continued to walk away.

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It took Hanley longer to get back than he planned. He had to dodge a German patrol and then take the long way around. It had been forty-five minutes since he left the wounded sergeant under the tree. He feared what he would find.

He reached the area where he had left Saunders and called out quietly to make his presence known. There was no response. He called again, this time louder and more frantically than he liked. There was still no response.

Hanley saw Saunders lying still beneath the tree. He crossed the distance between them in two long strides.

He knelt beside him feeling for a pulse. It was there but very weak. Hanley watched the sergeant's chest rise and fall in short, quick movements.

*At least he's still alive.*

He quietly thanked God for finding his sergeant alive and then lifted him off the ground and placed him over his shoulder.

About a quarter of a mile away, he found a cave. The entrance was covered with bushes and branches. He would have missed it if he hadn't been dodging the German patrol. He entered to see if it would be suitable for them to take cover and rest, but he found more than he could have ever hoped for.

The cave must have been a Maquis hideout. Not only was the entrance well hidden, but it was fully stocked. There was water, food, blankets, wood for a fire and medical supplies. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.



He had never been an overly religious man, not like Doc or Caje, but it was like God had answered his prayer and guided him to this place. If he could get Saunders here he could keep him alive until, God willing, the Americans or at the very least the Maquis could find them.

Hanley carried his wounded sergeant the quarter mile to the cave and placed him inside on the blanket he had laid out. He then brushed away any sign of their tracks as he closed the entrance behind him.

The cave was dark and felt cold and damp. Hanley covered Saunders with a blanket and noticed the shivering had begun. He felt the sergeant's forehead and found he was cold and clammy with sweat. The fever had started. He needed to keep Saunders warm and he needed to get food and water into him.

Hanley built a small fire, questioning his judgment in doing so. He hoped he could keep the smoke down to a minimum, and then the benefit to Saunders would outweigh the risk of them being detected. He knew he was fooling himself but he kept that thought in mind.

The Lieutenant began making a broth from some of the rations he had found. He knew it wouldn't taste the best, but it was hot and nourishing.

He sat by Saunders' side as the broth cooked. His mind began to wander back to four hours earlier. To the unbelievable massacre he had witnessed. The shelling, the tanks, the hand to hand combat. No one was prepared for such a German offensive and it had cost hundreds of lives in minutes.

His squad had been scattered by the shelling, leaving him alone with Saunders. They fought just a few feet from each other as unforeseen numbers of Germans advanced towards them.

From his cover behind a log, Hanley picked them off one at a time in relative safety. He didn't see the German flank them and come up from behind, but Saunders had.

Saunders tried to fire his Tommy gun, but it had jammed. He knew in just moments his lieutenant would be dead. He did the only thing he could.

"Lieutenant!" Saunders screamed for all he was worth. "Behind you!"

Springing from his cover, Saunders dived over his lieutenant, covering him with his body just as the German fired. The bullet struck him in the upper back by his shoulder blade. He cried out in pain and then rolled away, allowing Hanley to take the German soldier out with a single shot.

Hanley looked back to see Saunders gasping for breath then lose consciousness. He picked the man up, threw him over his shoulder. He had never run from a fight before but this time he did, and never looked back.

Saunders soon regained consciousness and they began the journey back to the American lines.

A soft moan broke through Hanley's thoughts, bringing him back to the present. He turned to see Saunders thrashing from side to side, his cries growing louder. He placed a hand on Saunders forehead, speaking quietly and calmly.

"Saunders, it's alright. We're safe and warm for the moment. Can you hear me?"

The sergeant's eyes fluttered open. They appeared glazed from fever and pain, but he recognized his Lieutenant.

"Lieutenant, where are we?" Saunders attempted to look around, but even the smallest movement caused him unbelievable pain. He closed his eyes tightly for a moment and then slowly reopened them.

"We're in what appears to be a Maquis hide out. We have everything we need." Hanley attempted a smile for his sergeant's benefit.

"Thirsty." A single word was all the weak man could muster.

Hanley carefully lifted Saunders' head, helping him to take several small sips of water from his canteen. Replacing the container on his web belt, he then turned to the broth he had been cooking.

"Here, take some of this." The Lieutenant placed the cup of hot liquid to his sergeant's lips. "It probably doesn't taste the best but it's hot and you need the fluids."

Saunders took a sip and then shook his head, pushing the cup away.

"Yes, Sergeant, you need it." Hanley placed the cup back to Saunders' lips, pushing him to drink all the liquid.

Hanley gently lay the wounded man's head back down on the makeshift pillow as Saunders closed his eyes against another wave of pain.

"Lieutenant." Saunders was still very weak and his voice very light. Hanley bent closer to hear what he was saying. "Leave me here. I have all the supplies I need. You can send someone back for me."

"I'm not leaving you, Sergeant. I've already told you that. We're going back together."

Hanley could see the distress in the man's face. He knew Saunders felt his wound could cost the lieutenant his life if he stayed. Hanley had to put those concerns to rest.

"Besides, I couldn't leave if I wanted to. The woods are crawling with Germans. So I guess you're stuck with me."

"Yes, sir." The weakened man whispered as he turned his head away from his lieutenant.

Saunders suddenly gasped as a wave of pain hit his back. He felt as if he were never going to take another breath. Hanley was right beside him holding him by his shoulders as his back arched with the intensity of the pain. When it finally passed, it left Saunders semiconscious and moaning.

Hanley grabbed the bag of medical supplies and began pulling everything out.

*God, please let there be some morphine.*

At the bottom of the bag, he found a tin box wrapped in thick material. Upon opening it, he found three syringes of morphine.

*Thank God.* He thought as he raised Saunders' sleeve. Saunders began to resist, pulling away.

"No, no morphine." He moaned through the pain. "Have to stay awake in case you need...."

Saunders voice trailed off, the effort to speak becoming too much for him.

"Yes, Saunders, you need the morphine." Hanley held his sergeant's arm down as he injected the drug.

It didn't take much effort because of the weakened state of the man. In a short period of time, Saunders' thrashing and moans grew silent as the morphine took effect. He was quickly in a drug induced sleep.

Hanley began to feel his own overwhelming exhaustion trying to take control. He fought to stay awake. He needed to stay awake. He needed to keep watch not only for patrols but on Saunders' condition also.

Hanley ate a few of the rations and then walked around; trying everything he could to stay awake. A soft moan returned him to his sergeant's side for a quick check. Leaning back against the wall, Hanley watched Saunders rhythmic breathing. He never realized he had fallen asleep.



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He awoke suddenly, not knowing where he was. He was hot, so hot he felt like he couldn't breathe. He pushed the blankets off and attempted to sit up. A pain in his back made him stop and close his eyes.

He remembered the battle and being wounded. He remembered being carried through the woods and the cave. He opened his eyes and saw Hanley asleep at his side.



He knew his presence put that man's life in danger. It was only a matter of time before the German patrols found this place. If they were discovered, Hanley would be taken prisoner. An officer would be a great prize and Saunders couldn't allow that to happen.

Hanley would never leave him as long as he was alive, and he knew he was dying anyway. Why take another life with him? Saunders knew what he had to do.

Rolling off the blanket, he tried to stand, but his leg wouldn't cooperate. He was too weak, so he began to crawl to the cave entrance.

Hanley had to survive. He was more than just a good officer. Rank may have prevented them from showing it outwardly, but deep down he considered him a friend.

Saunders knew he was doing the right thing. *At least this way Hanley would make it back.* Saunders thought as he pulled himself out of the cave entrance and into the woods.

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Hanley thought he heard a noise, and it startled him awake. He looked towards the cave entrance, but no one was there.

*Damn! I would have sworn someone was coming through the bushes. That's what I get for falling asleep.*

Hanley stretched as he stood and then decided to check Saunders' dressing. Hoping that the bleeding had stopped, he turned towards the blanket that held his sergeant. Hanley looked down in horror. The blanket was empty. Saunders was gone!

"Saunders!" Hanley called. "Saunders, where are you?"

Hanley quickly searched both side tunnels finding nothing. Coming back towards the fire he noticed the drag marks leading to the cave entrance and took off at a dead run. He followed the tracks out into the dark where they became harder to see. He didn't have to go far before he found his lost sergeant.

Saunders lay under a tree, curled up in a ball. He shivered violently and was delirious.

"Have to leave." Saunders voice shook with each shiver. "Have to give the Lieutenant a chance. He has to get back, has to report. Not worth the risk... not worth...."

Saunders voice trailed off as he shook violently again, his moans growing in volume.

“Damn you, Saunders.” Hanley said under his breath. “I’ve told you before, it is to me.”

Picking his wounded sergeant up in his arms, Hanley walked back into the cave.

“Besides, don’t you think HQ knows about the push by now, Sergeant?” Hanley continued as he laid Saunders back beside the fire.

Hanley covered Saunders with the blankets, and then stoked the fire. Taking the heated broth, he gently lifted the sergeant’s head, making him drink what was left.

Hanley checked Saunders’ dressings and found they were bloody again. His effort to leave the cave had reopened his wounds and he was bleeding again.

Hanley began changing the bandages. He became so intent on caring for his sergeant he never heard the bushes rustling behind him. A figure entered the cave, gun held on the two soldiers.

“Do not move!”

Hanley heard the voice behind him and raised his arms in the air.

“Stand up and turn around.” The French accent was so thick, Hanley could barely understand him.

Hanley stood and slowly turned around. A tall thin boy stood at the entrance of the cave. His dark, wavy hair fell onto his shoulders. He couldn’t have been more than 15 or 16 years of age and the fear in his eyes was very apparent.

“Who are you?” The boy shouted. “Why are you here?”

“You don’t have to be afraid of us, son.” Hanley addressed the young man, thankful that the boy spoke English. “We’re not your enemy, we’re Americans.”

“Who says I’m afraid?” The boy became very indignant. “Why are you here?”

“Son, if you will lower that rifle and sit down, I’ll explain everything.” Hanley tried to keep his voice as calm as possible.

“Do not tell me what to do.” The boy shouted, as he raised his rifle higher. “You answer my question now!”

“Alright, calm down.” Hanley raised his hands higher. “I had to find a place to bring my wounded sergeant that the Germans couldn’t find. We stumbled onto this place. I just need him to rest a while and then we’ll leave.”

The boy looked from Hanley to the wounded man on the ground. He watched as Saunders thrashed from side to side and moaned in pain. He then looked back at Hanley.

“He does not look so good.” The boy said, lowering the rifle a bit. “Is he going to die?”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.” Hanley stated.

Saunders let out a cry as a wave of pain hit him again. It startled the boy and he dropped the rifle. Hanley knelt beside the man trying to calm him.



Saunders opened his eyes and saw Hanley kneeling over him. He looked around and realized he was back in the cave. He moaned and Hanley noticed tears forming in his sergeant's eyes.

"Why didn't you just leave, Lieutenant?" Saunders blinked back his tears. "You should have just left. Why did you come after me?"

"Because, sergeant. I told you we go back together. Do you understand me? TOGETHER." Hanley stressed the last word.

Saunders looked into the bright green eyes of his Lieutenant and knew he meant what he said. He closed his eyes and moaned in pain.

Kneeling beside the Lieutenant, the boy watched in fascination as Hanley injected Saunders with more morphine. The Sergeant grew quiet again and fell asleep.

"Is he alright?" The boy seemed very concerned.

"Yea, for now." Hanley sat on the ground next to Saunders and leaned his head against the wall.

"How was he injured?" The boy asked.

"Saving my life." Hanley stated absently.

Shaking the memory from his mind, Hanley looked at the boy. His clothes were dirty, the right knee of his pants torn out. It was obvious the young man had been alone for quite sometime.

"We were in the middle of a battle. A German had gotten behind me and was about to fire. He got between us and covered me with his body."

"You had to drag him in here." The boy seemed confused.

"Drag him, what makes you say that?" Now Hanley was confused.

"That is how I knew you were in here. The drag marks outside."

Hanley smiled. "Oh those, no he decided if he were gone I'd leave and go back to our lines alone. So, he dragged himself outside while I was asleep. I brought him back."

The boy looked from Saunders to Hanley; a look of admiration on his face.

"You must be true friends." The boy saw that Hanley did not understand. "My father always told me only a true friend would risk his live for another. He not only risks his life to save you from the German soldier, but he also tried to leave so you would go back alone. You risk your life by refusing to go back without him. That is the markings of a true friend."

"What's your name, son?" Hanley asked, the boy's words running through his mind.

"Michael, Michael Montclair." The boy's eyes grew sad as he looked around the cave. "This was my father's hideout. He was a member of the Maquis and would hide here with his friends when the Bosh was near. They killed him last week. So now I take his place!"

The boy sat up straight and proud as tears filled his eyes.

"I'm sure your father would be proud of you, Michael." Hanley yawned.

He was still exhausted, but knew he had to get Saunders some help. He had to make a very difficult decision.

“Look, Michael, I need to get help for my sergeant or he’s going to die. Will you stay here with him while I go find the Americans and bring them back here?” Hanley saw sheer terror enter the boy’s face.

“Oh no, Lieutenant.” The boy stood and backed away slightly. “I know nothing of wounded men. I could not help him. You should stay. I will go find the Americans.”

“No, Michael.” Hanley’s stern voice stopped the boy cold. “It’s too dangerous for you out there. I’ll go.”

“No!” Michael was just as stern. “Do you not understand? If they see you they will shoot or capture you. If they see me, I am but a boy to them. I can move more freely.”

Michael stared at Hanley. “Trust me. I will bring back the Americans.”

Running from the cave, Michael quickly brush out all the tracks to or from the cave.

Hanley stared after the boy. *That kid is going to get himself killed.*

Hanley spent the next thirty-six hours awake and at Saunders side. The fever was raging and he was becoming more and more delirious.

Saunders called over and over for his mother and sister, Louise. He cried out his fears for his brother, Chris, who was too young to be fighting in this lousy war. He cried tears for the brother he had lost. Through it all, Hanley never left his side.

Hanley realized he was quickly running out of supplies. He had used half the water on sponging the fevered man down. He spent the other half on trying to keep his sergeant hydrated.

Hanley hadn’t eaten, drank or slept. He was totally exhausted now and was feeling lightheaded. He knew in his heart that the boy was probably dead. He felt a tinge of guilt for letting the boy go in the first place. He had even more guilt for not getting Saunders back.

He knew now that Saunders would probably not survive. Had he waited too long? Should He have tried to carry him back instead of staying here?

He had given Saunders the last of the morphine in the early afternoon, now it was dark. Hanley knew his sergeant wouldn’t need anymore morphine because he was now unconscious and the Lieutenant thanked God for that. At least he would die peacefully.

Exhaustion was over taking the tall Lieutenant and the dizziness was getting worse.

*I have to stay awake.* Hanley’s mind kept wandering and he would have to pull it back to reality. *I can’t sleep, not yet. If Saunders is going to die, it will be with a friend by his side, not alone.*

Hanley sat beside his sergeant, his hand on the man’s shoulder. He wanted Saunders to feel his presence, to know he wasn’t alone.

Hanley fought to keep his eyes open, but he was losing his battle. Exhaustion won out in the end, and he slept hard.

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Hanley thought he heard voices, but his mind wouldn't come out of the dark. He fought his way to the surface, as the voices grew louder. He could hear someone call his name, softly and gently.

Hanley slowly opened his eyes. He saw a face he knew. It was Cajé, Saunders' scout. The Lieutenant looked at the private, confused at first, then with recognition in his eyes.

"It's okay, Lieutenant, we're here now. We're going to get you back." Cajé's voice was soft and soothing.

Hanley closed his eyes again and leaned his head back against the wall. An image of his wounded sergeant flashed in his mind, and his eyes flew open, and he quickly tried to rise.

His sudden movement startled the Cajun and knocked him back on his butt.

"Saunders!" Hanley shouted.

"He's right here, Lieutenant." Hanley heard Doc's southern drawl beside him. "He's lost a lot of blood and he's real weak. He also has quite a fever going, but I think he'll make it if we can get him back right away."



Hanley tried again to stand, but a wave of dizziness caused him to fall back to the ground with a thud.

"Easy, Lieutenant." Cajé placed a hand on Hanley's shoulder.

The scout offered the Lieutenant his canteen and Hanley drank his fill.

"You better let Doc check you out after he's though with Sarge."

"No, I'm alright. Just tired." The men could hear the exhaustion in his voice. "How did you find us?"

From the entrance of the cave, Hanley heard a familiar voice.

"I brought them. I told you I would."

The squad parted, and the boy stepped up to the Lieutenant.

"Michael." Hanley whispered, closing his eyes and leaning his head back against the wall. "God, I thought you were dead."

Hanley opened his eyes and looked into the smiling eyes of the young boy.

"Dead? Me? Oh no, Lieutenant. I told you I could move freely. I just could not find the Americans." Michael looked sheepishly at Hanley who smiled back at the boy. "Then I ran into these men. They asked me if I had seen two Americans, a sergeant and a lieutenant. I knew it had to be you, so I brought them back here."

"Thank you, Michael." Hanley's smile broadened. "You probably saved Saunders' life."

Littlejohn and Kirby entered the cave carrying a stretcher they had made. They laid it next to Saunders and then noticed Hanley awake.

"Oh, good to see you awake, Lieutenant." Littlejohn smiled broadly. "We'll have your stretcher ready in a sec."

"I don't need a stretcher. I'll be fine in a few minutes."

"I'd rather you go by stretcher, sir." Doc never looked up from his task with Saunders as he spoke. "You've been through an awful lot the last three days."

"I'm fine, Doc. Let's worry about Saunders."

Hanley finally stood. He swayed slightly, but Cajé was at his side to steady him.

Littlejohn and Kirby carefully lifted Saunders. They placed him on the stretcher and wrapped him in blankets. Billy put out the fire as they all headed out of the cave.

"Michael?" Hanley called to the boy and saw his hair had fallen in his eyes. It made him look so young. "I think you should come with us, back to our lines."

"Why, Lieutenant?" Michael sounded surprised. "You know nothing about me?"

"Yes I do, Michael." Hanley saw the confused look on the boy's face. "Do you remember what you told me when you first found us here?"

"No, sir, I do not remember."

"You told me a true friend was someone who would lay down his life to protect or help a friend. Do you remember now?" Hanley smiled at the young man as he saw recognition in the boy's eyes and the nod of his head.

"You risked your life to find my squad and bring them back here to help us. Because of that my sergeant will live and I'll get back safe and sound. I would say that makes you our true friend."

Michael brushed his hair out of his eyes and smiled back at the Lieutenant. Hanley placed his arm around the boy's neck and they walked out of the cave together.

THE END