

This Combat story was written to try and break some serious writer's block and to recognize there are some things we just can't understand.

Cries the Spirit

By EPM

There's a moment—just a fraction in time, after every firefight when no one moves. When racing hearts begin their decent and oxygen starved lungs pull in a deep breath. But this time, the squad stood frozen in place, as if the ticking moments might erase the sight of the lone soldier lying face down on the warm French soil.



First squad had been sent out on a routine scouting mission. The only thing that was different was that their sergeant wasn't with them. Saunders was sidelined by a fall that had turned his ankle amazing shades of blue and purple. So Cajé had been assigned as squad leader—a quick in and out to see if there was any enemy movement.

Hanley grinned as he approached 1st Squad's sergeant. "You'd better get going soon Saunders or I might start to think I've got another Kirby on my hands."

"Your hands? Maybe you'd like Kirby to become your permanent radio man."

Hanley raised his arms as if to push away the offer. "No, no—that's alright. You seem to be the only one who can handle him." The lieutenant sat down and shook a cigarette out of his pack, offering Saunders one before he lit his own.

A grimace etched deep lines in Saunders' brow as he pushed himself up on his side. "They should be back any time now."

“You worried about them?” Hanley did all he could to keep a smile from twitching at the corners of his mouth.

Saunders chose to ignore the dig. “Not worried but we both know that anything can happen, even on a routine mission. I trust Cajé to keep them out of trouble, if he has a choice, that is.”

Neither man heard the Cajun approach and startled at the voice that asked for their attention. “Lieutenant, Sarge---.”

Before they could speak, Cajé began his report. His usual crisp, efficient manner was punctuated by halting dialogue as his mind mixed English and French in an effort to make himself understood. “We had not seen any sign of the Germans and were about to turn back when a machine gun opened up in front of us. We were able to take cover behind some downed trees and return fire but we were pinned down pretty good.”
He shifted restlessly from one leg to the other.

Saunders was immediately on guard. He knew by the scout’s behavior something must have gone terribly wrong. “Take it easy, Cajé. Take your time.”

“I left the squad to keep them busy while I worked my way to the right. That was the best cover but it took awhile before I could get into position to throw a grenade.” Cajé stopped and swallowed hard. “That’s when it happened. Emerson...Emerson stood up.”

Hanley stiffened. “What do you mean, private...he stood up.”

“Just that, sir. Before I could get into position, he just stood up.”

Saunders had pulled himself off the cot and into an upright position, balancing on his good foot. “Was he firing, trying to keep the attention on the rest of the squad while you moved into place?”

“No, Sarge. He didn’t have his gun. He just got up.”

“So are you telling me this man stood up on purpose?” Hanley’s sharp tone only added to Cajé’s discomfort.

Feeling tired and defeated, Cajé answered, “I can only tell you what I saw, lieutenant.”

“Alright, soldier, join the rest of the squad but tell them I want to speak to each one of them about this. Send Doc to my office in ten minutes.”

Cajé met Saunders’ eyes than looked back at Hanley. “Yes sir.” He turned and left.

“What the hell’s this all about? Cajé is saying Emerson just stood up and let the Krauts fill him full of holes. I have a hard time believing there isn’t more to the story.”



Cajé needed a moment to himself. There’d been no time after routing the German machine gun nest and getting the squad back. He stopped and leaned against the fountain that marked the town’s square. It probably had been pretty at one time with its spitting fish and whimsical mermaids. But now, the only water it held was what fell from the sky. It sat stagnant and dirty, a breeding ground for mosquitoes.

He lit a cigarette and closed his eyes against the bright sun. His mind traveled back over the weeks that Emerson had been part of the squad. He seemed like a nice kid—open and friendly. “What the hell had happened?”

An unseen mist rose from the still water in the fountain. It thickened and congealed into Emerson’s image. The soldier walked toward the Cajun without making a ripple on the surface, until he stood at Cajé’s back. He was dirty and sweat-stained from battle with his dark brown hair hanging limply over his forehead. Across his chest was a bloody tattoo of bullet holes.

“Caje—Caje, I’m sorry that it happened when you were the squad leader. I didn’t plan it exactly. It’s just that I couldn’t take it anymore. I tried, I really tried.”

The tired private threw the rest of his cigarette on the ground. Callused hands scrubbed at his eyes. He’d probably never know what happened. He headed back to the waiting squad.



Doc knew he hadn’t been able to shed anymore light on what happened than Caje. He stopped and stared at the fountain. It seemed to him that he saw the same dirty, broken structure in every town they pushed through.

I know you can’t stand losing anybody, Doc, particularly, the way I died. You’re thinking how could I throw away my own life when so many others aren’t given a choice. But when you’re so scared, so tired, you can’t see any other way out. I’m sorry, Doc.



Billy waited for Littlejohn to finish with Lieutenant Hanley. He leaned against the rim of the fountain losing himself in his own thoughts until Littlejohn’s voice roused him.

“Hey, Billy.”

“Hey.”

“Geez, Littlejohn, why’d he do it? I mean, he just stood up and let the Krauts kill him. I don’t get it.”

“Well, I don’t think we’re meant to get it.” Littlejohn sat next to his friend.

Lines formed on Billy’s face as he scrunched it up in confusion.

“Huh?”

Emerson must have been scared for a long time. We can't understand 'cause we don't feel the same way."

"Me not scared? I'm scared every time the Sarge says saddle up—every time we clear a village. You bet I'm scared."

"I know, Billy, but it's not the same. We're all scared but not like Emerson. Maybe he just couldn't be scared anymore and this was the easiest way out for him." Littlejohn got up.

Billy pushed himself away from the fountain. "Well I still don't understand."

They started back to join the others. "Like I said, I'm not sure we're meant to get it."

"You're right, Littlejohn—I couldn't take being afraid anymore. My heart always pounding, sweat pouring off me, feeling like I was gonna throw up all the time. But the worst part was trying to hide it so you guys didn't think I was a chicken. The harder I tried to hide it the more it clawed to get out."



"If you ask me, he was just crazier than an outhouse rat!" Kirby's fists were balled tightly at his side.

"Well, no one asked you if you thought he was crazy, private. I asked you what happened." Hanley moved close to the agitated soldier.

"I saw the same thing everybody else did, lieutenant. Cage was trying to flank the Kraut machine gun while the rest of us drew fire. Next thing I know, the kid drops his gun and stands up." Kirby looked down for a moment. When he spoke again, his tone was quiet and questioning. "One thing was kinda funny, sir. When he stood up, he held his arms away from his sides. Sorta like he was givin` up." Brown eyes held green but no further comments were exchanged.

"You're excused, private. Join the rest of the men."

Kirby took his time walking back, hardly noticing the ruined fountain as he passed. He was tired of discussing it and that's all Billy and Littlejohn and Doc could talk about. Caje sat off in the corner, cleaning his rifle, watching and listening, like he always does. He just didn't want to think about it anymore.

“Of all of them, Kirby, I thought you'd be the one who'd understand. Maybe I'm wrong, but I got the feeling from being around you these past few weeks that you had some of the same feelings I did. Maybe not the panic but I could tell you were more afraid than you wanted anyone to know.”



Saunders leaned his crutches against the fountain's edge. The sun was beginning to disappear as he pushed himself back until his bad ankle no longer touched the ground. He watched in silence as Hanley perched next to him.

“You find out anything, lieutenant?”

“Nothing we didn't already know from Cage's report.” He took a long, satisfying drag. He absently wondered how many cigarettes he'd smoked today.

“What are you going to say in the letter to the kid's parents?”

“That Private Samuel Emerson was killed in action fighting for his country.” Suddenly tired of the taste of tobacco, Hanley threw his cigarette into the dank water. “Come on, Saunders, let's get you back to bed.”

Emerson's image thinned and began to revert to the mist that had created it, settling softly on the motionless water.

The End