

# DELUSION

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*My thanks to all of the Combat! writers; you inspire and encourage me! Thanks, and a grin, to my daughter, Mandy, for asking to read my story, and afterward saying, "I didn't know you could write." RBW, special hugs for loving everything I write. And a great big THANK YOU to Doc! You saved me from my many bumbles!*

## Prolog

Night noises filtered through the window screens making an accompaniment to the occasional tinkling sound of a moth as it battered itself against the glowing circular fluorescent tube mounted high above the kitchen sink. The tube cast a feeble, bluish light over the gray haired man who was seated at the kitchen table. Elbows resting on the plastic table top, one long thin hand cradled his skull-like head; the other was wrapped around a water glass. A cardboard shoebox sat open in the middle of the table stuffed front to back with official looking envelopes. Had someone looked, they would have noted return addresses from the offices of state senators and representatives, the Department of the Army, The Office of the President of the United States of America. The latest letter lay unfolded on the box lid. His lined, white paper tablet and pen were squared up in front of him on the table. Lines of spidery writing crawled across the page.

A gray tabby padded softly in from the mud room. It silently circled the man's thin legs, coaxing him slowly out of his reverie. Leaning down to pet the cat, he started to speak to it but found that his mouth was too dry to form the words. He took the last swallow from his glass and cleared his throat.

"All right then. Are you hungry?" The soft slur spoke of the hills and back woods of West Virginia.

Unwinding his skeletal, dungaree covered legs from around the rungs of the chair; he pushed himself up and shuffled stiff-legged to the counter. Reaching into the cabinet, he came up with a half-filled bag of cat food.

"You're a nice ole cat," the man pronounced, as he filled the food dish and set it on the floor. Lost in thought, he stroked the animal as it ate.

Satisfied, the cat wandered off, leaving the man stooped over the food dish. He slowly straightened his emaciated frame, brushed imagined dirt from his spotless white t-shirt and turned to take his seat at the table. His empty glass caught his attention. Picking it up, he shuffled to the refrigerator for ice. The freezer section was lined with stacks of metal and plastic ice cube trays, a large plastic bowl held loose ice cubes which he scooped into his glass. After carefully closing the freezer door he moved to the counter again to pick up a nearly empty vodka bottle and poured its contents into his glass. He topped the glass with a bit of tonic water then returned to his seat. Taking a large swallow from his glass, the man took up his pen and returned to his letter.

"What were you thinking? Why did you send a half-blind man to war?"



"Hey! Doc!" Saunders yelled to his medic as he strode through the semi-organized chaos of the bivouac area. The heads of a half dozen medics popped up and looked around for the source of the call. Saunders followed up with a short, sharp whistle that Saunders' Doc recognized instantly; he waved in recognition.

"We're leaving!" Saunders yelled, pointing to Doc's medical bag, an indication that Doc should replenish his supplies and rejoin the squad.

Saunders walked on down the road, small puffs of dust rising with each footfall. Several groups of men were sprawled in the shade of large elm trees that lined the road, his squad among them. Stepping out of the early morning sun and into the shade, Saunders swept his helmet off, ran his hand vigorously through his sweat darkened hair, then replaced the helmet. It wasn't much, but he felt cooler for it. The sun was barely up but already the morning mist had burned off. The day showed promise of being a scorcher.

"We're moving out."



"Aw, Sarge, we just got here," protested Kirby around the cigarette dangling from his lips. "Besides, it's too hot to go hikin' today. My dogs are barkin'!" A tired grimace flickered across the faces of several of the men at what was a typical response from Kirby.

"Where're we goin', Sarge?" queried Littlejohn.

"Gather around," Saunders replied. Stooping, he pulled out his map and opened it. His men moved in close as he pointed out their current position and where they were going.

"H Company is coming off the line. They're being pulled back into reserve. K Company is going to move up here to relieve them. An entire squad went missing up there."

"Yeah, well, what about us? Huh, Sarge? We've been at it steady for weeks now. I don't see nobody ever comin' to relieve us!"

"Kirby!" Sarge snapped at him.

Kirby took one look at Saunders' face and shut his mouth. Usually Kirby didn't give up that easily but today the stormy glint in Saunders' eyes silenced him. Kirby shrugged to himself, "Must be the heat."

"Lt. Hanley has a little job for us. Sgt. Pennington's squad had a forward observation post...here." Saunders indicated a spot on the map at the extreme edge of what had been H Company's area. "HQ lost communications with them some time last night. We're going to take a look."

For an instant Saunders allowed his thoughts to alight on Sergeant Pennington. He'd known Pennington from a lifetime ago, in Italy, when Pennington came into the squad as a replacement. They had shared some very rough times then. Times here hadn't been any better.

Jerking himself back to the present, the sergeant glanced around at his men. Their exhaustion showed. Drawn faces and narrowed brows, ... clearly they were bone weary. How could they be otherwise? Like the rest of Division, they had been pushing forward for weeks without a break. Everyone needed rest. If it had been up to him, they'd all stay in the shade of this huge old tree for the next week doing nothing but eating and sleeping and retelling old stories. These were good men, solid and true. Saunders knew that they would do anything for him. Sometimes that made the job tougher.

"Questions?" Saunders asked brusquely, as he stuffed emotion back into the stoutly-chained box that lived deep in his heart.

Caje spoke up, "When do we leave, Sarge?"

"As soon as Doc gets back. Alright, Nelson, you and Anderson pick up rations, two days. Caje, Littlejohn, Hart, ammunition.

Saunders checked his own equipment, and then sank down to the ground, back against the tree, to get a few minutes rest while the squad set about their tasks. He had barely enough time to think that a quick cat nap would be welcome before he dropped into it. Sleep was a rare thing; you had to catch it when you could.

It seemed that no time had passed until he became aware that his men were returning. Straightening his helmet, Saunders climbed to his feet. Doc had quietly joined him in the deep shade and had nodded off propped against a tree root. He prodded Doc's booted foot with his own. Doc awakened with a start then gave a sheepish grin as he too climbed to his feet.

"I'm all set, Sarge. Where are we goin' anyway?"

"Hey Sarge, look what I got!" Kirby interrupted. Kirby extended the pouch toward Saunders, pulling the sides out to expose eight large chocolate. "The good ones, Sarge, the kind the officers get." Saunders responded with a brief grin and a nod. Kirby noticed with relief that his sergeant's mood seemed to have lifted.

"Doc," Saunders turned to his medic, "K Company's being pulled back. They lost an advance squad sometime last night. We're going to check it out."

The men began exchanging the items that each had secured: rations, ammo, filled canteens. They were just finishing stowing their additional gear in pockets and pouches when a jeep roared up. Lt. Hanley whipped the wheel around sharply and jammed on the brakes, hurling gravel into the air and throwing a new coating of dust into the overhanging branches.

"Sergeant, a word," he ordered.

"What's up, Lieutenant?" asked Saunders. He slung his Thompson over one shoulder and, tipping back his helmet, he ambled over to the jeep. Hanley's ostensible annoyance evaporated as he delivered his orders with a wry smile.

"Get some sleep and some hot chow. There's been a little change in plan. You'll be moving up with the rest of Company. Your mission hasn't changed, but you'll be moving into position after dark. We

leave tonight, 2100 hours. I'll see you before we leave." With that, the lieutenant wheeled his jeep around and headed back down the dusty road.

Consulting his watch, Saunders announced, "Well, you heard the man, get some rest!"

"How about them apples? All dressed up and no place to go," quipped Kirby.

"I don't know about you, Kirby, but I'm goin' t' sleep" replied Nelson as he picked out a soft piece of ground and flopped down, punching up his pack for a pillow.



On his belly, Private John Matson quietly snaked his way deeper into the underbrush and lay still. The firefight had been brief and intense, but now all sound had died away. Matson held his breath, listening. His senses reached out, trying to detect motion, or anything that would tell him what had happened, anything that would tell him that he was not alone. *What was that? The faint jingle of a dropped equipment belt?* Holding his breath, John closed his watering eyes and listened intently. The noise was not repeated. The night slowly returned to normal as insects and tree frogs picked up their nighttime chatter.

*I can't stay here. I gotta find the guys!* Part of John's mind screamed at him to jump into action. He fought it down and quieted his careening thoughts. He had to be smart about this or he'd get himself lost and be no good to his friends or to himself.

*Think.* He encouraged himself. *Listen.* The familiar commands calmed him. A sense of peace began to permeate him. It was dark, and his sense of time had deserted him when the first shots rang out. He had no idea how long he had been alone out here.

John lay where he was, hidden under some sort of vine-like undergrowth, and pulled himself together. *Think John. What happened?* He allowed part of his mind to go back over recent events. The squad had been on outpost duty. Dug in at the edge of a field, they were out in front of H Company, being the eyes and ears of that little part of the war. All had been quiet. Sgt Pennington set the watch, two hours on, two hours off. John had been asleep in his foxhole when all hell broke loose. Rifle shots, yells, and screams of pain were the alarm that pulled him from his dreams. Now in the dark he didn't know where his squad was. He didn't know where Sgt. Pennington was. Disoriented from dark and sleep, John didn't know even where he was, but common sense kept him down and quiet until he could figure out at least some of that.

Years of helping his family eke out a living on the farm in the hills of West Virginia had taught Johnny Matson how to work as part of a team, but it also taught him self reliance. Both had served him well during the months he'd been in the Army.

The excitement was over, and in the aftermath the dark and quiet lulled Johnny. Two weeks on the line with plenty of walking and little sleep left him an easy target for the soft, familiar voices of crickets and the whirring wings of moths. Suddenly, Johnny awoke with a start! The sky had lightened. Without moving, Johnny looked around. As usual, everything was blurry but Johnny studied his surroundings. There was no movement to give away the presence of any living creature. Slowly, with infinite care, Johnny climbed to his feet. The woods behind him were still and dark. By squinting hard, he could just make out the mounds of earth a few yards ahead that showed where his squad had been dug in last night at the edge of the field. There was no sign of them there now.

Unconsciously, Johnny reached into an inside pocket and removed a square of dark fabric. After wetting it from his canteen, he wiped at his eyes. As usual, they were sore and crusted, the dust and debris clinging to his lashes. When this clean-up task was complete, he peered around again. The day was just a bit brighter, and his surroundings were a lot clearer. Moving cautiously, Johnny began searching for his missing friends.

Last night he had been disoriented. He recalled a light, but thinking about it now, Johnny decided that it must have been a flashlight beam out in the meadow. From the cover of the grove, he studied the meadow. Everything appeared to be quiet now, but there was nothing that would entice Johnny to move out into the open. Instead, he circled in a search pattern that kept him within the grove. Keeping under cover, he had worked his way more than a fifty yards from his foxhole when he noted scuffed up undergrowth at the very edge of the meadow.

The sun had risen, making his job a little easier. Leaning in close, Johnny studied the ground as he extended tentative, exploring fingers. *There. Shell casings.* As he held one close to his face to

examine it, he thought, *Ours*. Moving on he found a discarded weapon, an M1, and then another and then other bits of discarded equipment. *What happened?*

An hour later, he had finished his slow, careful examination of the surrounding area. His search had revealed two helmets, four field packs and two rifles. He found the radio kicked deep under some fallen brush. This he dragged out and took with him. Farther on, he found another discarded M1 and some dried spatters and a single congealed pool of blood, but there were no bodies. There could be only one explanation; they had all been captured, Sgt. Pennington, Tony Calabresi, Tom Dudley, and Willie Thyne. All four of them had been taken prisoner.

Stunned, Johnny leaned back against the nearest tree and tried to collect his thoughts. The single thought, *How did this happen?* reeled around in his mind. No answer came. It was only luck that he'd been asleep, dug in on the left flank. The attack must have come from across the meadow to the right. He'd barely struggled to his feet before the skirmish was over, and his friends were gone. A string of thoughts, each starting with *if only*, paraded across his mind until Johnny collapsed under their weight and sank to the ground holding his head in despair.

He sat there a very long time, bent under an unwarranted burden of guilt. Finally, pushing these feelings deep down, Johnny came back to himself. A new resolve took hold. Retrieving his helmet from the ground, he plopped it decisively back on his head and reached for the radio. With luck, it might still work.

Leaning in close, Johnny flipped the radio on, took up the hand piece and began the chant that might connect him to the world. "Mountain Man, this is Badger. Come in." He paused and repeated the call in his West Virginia drawl for several very long minutes before being rewarded with a response.

"This is Mountain Man." The voice held a note of relief. "Is that you West Virginia?"

"Yeah, it's me."



For the second time in less than two hours, Hanley drove his jeep the winding, weaving journey up the dusty road in search of Saunders. He'd felt better about the last trip; then the message had been that Saunders and his men would get a hot meal and a chance for a few hours of uninterrupted sleep. But things had changed; a man from the lost squad had called in. There was a chance those men might still be alive.

"Sarge, Hanley's comin'." The Cajun's voice was pitched low but it instantly snapped his sergeant out of a sound sleep and put him on the alert.

Hanley's arrival now could mean only one thing; their mission was changed. Not allowing himself time to dwell on it, Saunders ambled over to meet the lieutenant and get the bad news head-on.

"Your mission's been moved up," Hanley informed him. Saunders' look told the lieutenant that he was stating the obvious. "One of the men from the lost squad, Matson, got the radio working and called in."

"What happened?"

"The squad got hit sometime last night. Matson survived, found the radio after daybreak and called in."

"Is he hurt?"

"No, he's okay. HQ said that it looks like the rest of the squad was captured. It was real quiet. Then a squad just disappears. It has HQ worried. The Germans could be planning something big. G2 needs information and Matson may have it. Find out what he knows. Bring back a prisoner if you can." Fishing inside his jacket, Hanley came up with a flimsy paper sheet. "Here's the latest overlay."

The two bent over Saunders' map while Hanley pointed out where Saunders would find Private John Matson.

"Check in when you locate him," Hanley paused and then added, "and be careful."

A half smile crossed Saunders' lips as he nodded. "I'll see what I can do, Lieutenant."

"Saddle up!" Saunders commanded as Hanley turned his jeep around and headed down the dusty road once more. "Lt. Hanley got us a ride. Let's not keep 'em waiting."

With that the men of first squad gathered up their weapons and field packs, then fell in to walk back to the CP and a waiting transport truck.

"Yahhh. It's the Army way. Hurry up and wait. Take a break there, Private Kirby. No, forget about getting' some rest. Fall in! There's no pleasin' 'em," grumbled Kirby to no one in particular.

Littlejohn sighed loudly. *Kirby is Kirby. There's no changing him.*

The men of first squad, jammed together in the transport, jostled each other with each lurch as the truck driver attempted to miss the deepest holes in the road. After weeks of rain, things were finally drying out. Now it was hot and dusty and what had been deep quagmires were now deep, dry ruts. With one final lurch, the truck climbed up out of the tire tracks and onto the side of the road.

"Heya, nice ride! Thanks buddy!" Kirby quipped loudly in the direction of the cab as he climbed down from the truck with the rest of the squad. Saunders thumped the side of the truck and waved to the driver, who, with a grinding of gears, headed back down the road.

Wasting no time, Sergeant Saunders pulled out his map and motioned the men to gather around. "Alright, listen up!" The men quieted. "We're still behind our own lines here, but we'll be moving into German territory....here," he said, indicating several marks on the map. "We should pick up Matson about here. I'll decide what we do after I talk to him. Alright, Cajé, take the point. Anderson, Nelson, Doc, Littlejohn, Hart. Kirby, you bring up the rear. Move out."

"Yah, Kirby, you bring up the rear. Yer always bringin' up the rear," Kirby grouched under his breath as the squad moved out.

Out ahead of the squad, Cajé cautiously sought their route across farm fields, streams, and strips of forest. Ever on the alert for Kraut patrols or outposts, he kept them under cover as much as possible. But even under the trees, the early morning sun's heat threatened to suffocate them. As the men trudged on, sweat trickled down their faces, and their shirts darkened. They were used to hardships, long hikes with little rest and short rations. They carried the barest of human essentials. Most of the weight they carried was in the business of war, ammo belts and pouches, grenades and their weapons, and these got heavier as the day progressed.

After two hours, Saunders called a halt, "Take five." Everyone sank down where he stood, grateful for a break.

"No smokes," he warned them. "We're behind enemy lines." Saunders fought down the itch in his fingers to reach for his own pack of cigarettes. Discipline was his friend; it could keep them all alive. Sometimes it seemed as though it was all he had ever known. Quickly, he shook that thought loose and cast it away. *Focus on the job.* As he pulled out his map and moved forward to kneel down next to Cajé, he noted that Kirby and Anderson had moved out from the group to stand watch without being told.

"Okay?"

"Yah, Sarge. How much farther?"

It was a common exchange between them, one that they both understood to mean far more than the simple words. *It's a tough job, skulking out in front, senses always on high alert, trying to find a safe route. I know it's tough; I know you can do it. But right now, are you okay? Yah, I'm okay.*

Heads together, they checked the map again. "He should be just about here, about a mile from this river," Saunders said, indicating a point on the map that showed a plateau. They were climbing the back side of the hill, a landmark on Saunders' map. Assured that they were on the right track and making good progress, Saunders refolded his map and stowed it inside his jacket.

"Five minutes." Saunders said quietly, as he stood up and straightened the sling and took a better grip on his Thompson. He walked back to check on the rest of his men, most of whom were now sprawled out on the ground.

"Hey Sarge, how much farther?" queried Hart from the lumpy patch of ground where he lay.

"Not far, Hart. We'll be there before you know it." Saunders responded with a wry grin that he didn't feel. Hart was new to the squad although most of the men knew him. He came into K Company as a replacement but was wounded at St. Lo and out of the action for a little while. Hart spoke German fluently, which made Hanley especially happy to have him in the platoon. This was his first mission since



his return to the front. *Always a concern. You never know how they're going to come back after...* Saunders allowed the thought to trail off. *Time to get moving.*

They had traveled less than a mile when Cajé's hand flashed a warning signal. Saunders quickly repeated it for the men to the rear. They'd been moving slowly through a wooded area, and at their sergeant's signal each silently dropped down into cover in the underbrush. Bent low, Saunders moved up to Cajé's position, his eyes following the scout's gesture toward the edge of the woods. Fifty yards ahead, he could just make out the unmistakable signs of fresh digging and the mounds of earth that formed the rim of a foxhole.

"Any sign of Matson?" Saunders asked quietly.

"Over there," Cajé responded pointing toward a group of trees that stood well beyond the earthworks and close to the meadow off to their right. Squinting hard into the sunlight that splashed the outer edges of the tree group, Saunders could just make out a lump that had to be the top of a helmet silhouetted between the tree trunks.

"He hasn't spotted us," Cajé reported.

"We'll move in and get his attention," Saunders responded. Signaling his men to remain where they were, Cajé and Saunders started working their way through the trees toward Matson.

Moving in closer, Saunders gave a low whistle followed quickly by the latest sign, "Ham".

With a start, Matson instantly brought his rifle to bear. After a brief moment, he called out, "Eggs!"

"Matson!" Saunders called sotto voce. "It's Saunders. K Company. 361<sup>st</sup>."

There was a pause, and then Cajé and Saunders heard a deep sigh of relief followed by a dull thunk as the helmet in the trees tipped forward to rest against the nearest tree trunk.

"Well, Ah sure am glad ta see you fellas!" Declared Johnny Matson, as he emerged from behind the tree trunks where he'd taken cover hours before. "Ah'm John Matson, H Company."

Saunders' waved the men forward. Doc, trotting on the double, arrived first, medical bag in hand ready to give aid.

"You hurt?" Doc asked quietly. Eyeing Matson critically, he noted the usual scrapes and bruises normally associated with infantrymen. Johnny was a smallish man, thin and wiry, his dirty, oversized uniform giving him a famished look. His long thin face made his ears appear to stick out almost comically, and there was a strained look about his face that Doc figured was well justified given the man's circumstances. Johnny's eyes were rheumy, the skin surrounding them chapped and sore looking. Involuntarily, Doc reached out to examine them, but Johnny drew back from the touch.

"Naw, Ah'm alright. Ah can take care of 'em," the young man responded gravely to Doc. He turned toward the group of men who had gathered around him, seeking out the sergeant.

Shrugging mentally, Doc backed off and chalked up the man's reaction to the strain of losing his squad and being out here alone.

Saunders turned to the squad who had gathered around Private Matson under the trees. Anxious for any tidbit, his men had shifted close enough to hear anything of interest. "Alright, break it up! Anderson, Nelson, take the flanks. Kirby, drop back and check our trail....and keep your eyes open. Get back here quick if you see anything." Saunders ordered. "And don't fire unless you have to. We don't want to let anyone know we're here." Reluctantly the men gave way, trudging off to their assignments.

"Cajé, I might need you here." Saunders' call stopped his scout who had started to move off.

"You okay, Matson?" Saunders noted that despite his ordeal the young soldier was wearing the hopeful, expectant expression of a beagle. At the other's nod, Saunders continued. "What happened?"

"We got here the night before last. The sarge had us dig in over there, on the edge of that field." Johnny pointed vaguely over his shoulder.

"How many are in your squad?" Saunders interrupted.

"Five. Me and Calabresi, the sarge, Ah mean Sergeant Pennington, Tom Dudley, and Willie Thyne.

"What happened yesterday?"

"It was quiet all yesta'day. We never saw nobody. Last night me and Clabresi had the watch until three. Then the sarge, Tom and Willie took over. Ah was sleepin' in my foxhole when all hell broke loose. Ah come up quick but by the time Ah figured out who was who an' had my rifle pointed in the right direction it was all over." Johnny's eyes had taken on a faraway look as he spoke. But as he finished, his expression changed as a fleeting shiver of fear passed over him. "Ah don't know what happened ta Calabresi," Johnny puzzled. "He shoulda been in the foxhole next ta mine. "

"How many Krauts were there?" asked Saunders, breaking the spell.

"Ah don't know, Sergeant. It was too dark. It happened too quick. There was a little rowl and then there wasn't nothin'. Ah couldn't see nothin'. I listened hard but I couldn't hear nothin'. After it got light enough I looked all aroun'. I found rifles, helmets, and packs. Someone was wounded, 'cause I found some blood on the ground. An' after a while I found the radio. It was chucked in the brush and kinda beat up. I fussed with it until it started workin' and then I called in. "

"Is there anything else?" Saunders prodded.

"Ah looked all aroun' real careful...and there's no sign of nobody! Sergeant, I think they took 'em all prisoner!" Johnny finished. This was a painful final assessment. His friends, his brothers, were gone, and he was left behind. That was all that mattered.

Johnny paused, tilting his head to look directly into Saunders' face. "Do ya think we can get 'em back?"

That explained the beagle face. The kid wanted to find his friends. He knew how the kid felt; he'd felt the same way too many times. Saunders mulled the situation over. His orders were to replace the missing squad and get a prisoner. Nothing had been said about trying a rescue.

"We have our orders," he responded gruffly.

"Sergeant, please," Johnny pleaded, "Ah let them down," he finished in a fierce whisper.

At Saunders' hard look the young soldier straightened his shoulders and then he went on in a rush. "Ah let them down. Ah was so tired. We were all tired. Nobody slept. We were dug in snug enough, but nobody could sleep. We all just ....ah don't know what was wrong...but we all just hunkered down in our foxholes and ..." Johnny's voice trailed off. His eyes, already inflamed and gummy, were running. Self-conscious, he turned away from Saunders, took out his cloth and cleaned them again.

Saunders silently watched the procedure, his own eyes feeling like they wanted to water. He waited a moment for John to finish his story. When he didn't, Saunders prodded him, "And...what?" he asked.

"Ah'm sorry, Sergeant. Ah don't know. We were all kinda spooked I guess. It was so quiet..." John's words trailed to a halt.

"Spooked!?"

Johnny continued as though he hadn't heard Saunders' exclamation. "Then I must of fell asleep. Sergeant, I should of stayed awake with them," Johnny lamented.

Sure that for the moment he wasn't going to get anything more, Saunders stepped away from Johnny. "Doc," he called, "check his eyes."

This time Johnny caught Saunders' stormy look and didn't resist.

"Caje, take a look." Saunders ordered, and Caje moved out to check the surrounding area.

"How long have they been like that?" Doc asked as he lightly probed the reddened, swollen skin around Johnny's eyes.

"A while. It comes an' goes." He added as a further explanation.

"Well they sure look sore. Can you see okay?" the medic inquired.

"Ah can see, but my eyes get to runnin' so bad sometimes that Ah gotta keep wipin' 'em or I'll trip over my own feet."

Doc finished his examination and began rummaging around in one of his pouches. "I can't see anything wrong with your eyes. I wish I knew how to make them stop watering." Finding the tube of ointment that he sought, Doc proceeded to apply the contents to the skin surrounding Johnny's eyes.

"But this might help with the sore spots. "

Doc returned the tube to his pouch and absentmindedly wiped the residue of the greasy ointment from his fingers onto his pants. "Try to use something clean when you wipe them," he added, and then turned to his sergeant to report.

"Thanks, Doc. I heard." Then turning back to Matson, he picked up where he'd left off. "Has there been any activity today? Any German patrols?"

"There was some movement 'way up yonder yesterday afternoon. When we checked it, it was just a pig. After last night, it's been real quiet."

After a half dozen questions, it was clear that the kid knew nothing more. Pennington's squad had been in place for a couple of days but the area had been quiet...until last night.

"Sarge!" Slightly out of breath, the scout crept back through the underbrush. "I found a trail."

"Which way?" asked Saunders.



Pointing across the field to the wooded area beyond, Cajé responded, "It's along the edge of the hill, just beyond those trees. It winds down into a valley. I couldn't see much, but I thought that I heard voices."

Saunders waited while his scout considered what he'd heard.

"Sarge, there was a breeze comin' up out of the valley. Sound could carry pretty far on a breeze like that." Cajé paused again then gave a slight nod of his head and continued. "They sounded like Americans."

In one long-practiced gesture, Saunders tipped off his helmet, whipped the beads of sweat from his brow, and clapped the helmet back in place. Of the many things Cajé could have reported, this was certainly the least expected. He paused to consider Cajé's report. There were only two possible sources for American voices and source number one, his own squad, was deployed within this grove of trees. If Cajé was right, there was a real possibility of finding Pennington and his lost squad.

"Okay, Cajé. We'll call it in. Radio!"

Unslinging the radio from his back, Littlejohn knelt down and stuck out the handset to Saunders.

"Do you think we can find them, Sarge?" Littlejohn whispered.

"I didn't say we were going after them!" Sarge snapped, but in the back of his mind the hope that they might find the lost men persisted.

"Checkmate King Two this is White Rook. Checkmate King Two this is White Rook. Over."

"This is King Two. Go ahead, White Rook." Lt. Hanley answered.

"King Two, we've reached our objective." Saunders quickly filled in Hanley on what they'd found, and then added, "Lieutenant, I think we should at least check it out."

"Wait one," was his lieutenant's terse response.

Saunders waited. The handset remained silent for several long minutes, long enough for Saunders to turn his mind loose to formulate the beginnings of a plan. He glanced around to check on his men. He could see Kirby just making his way back through the trees. The others were spread throughout the grove, silent and still. Littlejohn, only a few feet away, was intently studying John Matson.

"Is there a problem, Littlejohn?" Saunders asked quietly, his gaze following Littlejohn's.

"Ahh...I don't know Sarge." Littlejohn answered after a slight hesitation. "I don't know." He repeated giving his head a shake in lieu of trying to verbalize his thoughts. He was having a problem shaking the feeling that accompanied Matson's use of the word 'spooked'.

Static on the radio interrupted further conversation as Saunders twisted one of the controls and shoved the receiver against his ear to better hear the lieutenant. Littlejohn shrugged and then sank back to the ground where he was mostly concealed by low brush. He couldn't decide if he was glad that the Sarge had been interrupted or not. He had an uneasy feeling; there was something a little bit odd about John Matson. Maybe it was the result of his natural introspection, or maybe it was simply too much time on the front lines, but Littlejohn had learned to, if not quite trust his feelings, at least to give them more than a passing glance.

A few feet away, leaning back against a tree trunk, helmet tipped at an angle to shield his eyes, Doc silently watched John Matson. The kid had insisted that he was okay, but Doc was not convinced. Something wasn't quite right. As he watched, the young soldier pulled out a square of cloth, dampened the corner of it from his canteen and cautiously dabbed at his eyes, being careful to not disturb the ointment. When the job was finished he refolded the square then returned it to an inside jacket pocket. Whatever it was, Doc promised himself to keep an eye on Matson.

Saunders slid the handset back into the radio pack then straightened up. A quick glance around showed him that everything was quiet. Kirby had returned but was keeping watch to their rear from fifty feet away. To the right and left, he could just make out Anderson and Nelson, one on each flank, keeping watch. His low whistle caught their attention, and then he motioned all of them in. Saunders' mind raced as it worked on a plan to accomplish their next mission.

"Gather around," Saunders said quietly. "Matson, you get your wish. You, Cajé, and Hart are with me. We're going to check out that valley. If we're lucky we'll bring back a prisoner. Kirby, Littlejohn, Nelson, Anderson, Doc. You dig in here. You're our base of operations. Littlejohn, you're on the radio. I want you to check in with the lieutenant in an hour and every hour after that until we get back. You got it?"

"Right, Sarge." Littlejohn responded.

"Kirby, you're in charge. Get the men dug in. Keep 'em down and keep 'em quiet. We should be back by dark. Questions?"

"Right, Sarge....Uh, Sarge..." Kirby hesitated. He glanced around to where Cajé, Hart, and Matson were standing but didn't continue.

Saunders turned his fierce blue gaze on Kirby. "What is it, Kirby?"

"Nothin' Sarge....uh, just watch yourself, okay?" Kirby finished lamely.

"Right." Saunders replied. *You just never know with Kirby. One minute he's the biggest gold brick around and the next ...well.* Saunders gave him a nod and then turned to collect his men for the scouting trip that he hoped would get them some information, net them a prisoner, and maybe find Matson's missing squad.



"Alright guys, lets dig in and make ourselves comfortable," Kirby ordered. If anyone noticed a note of trepidation in his voice they kept it to themselves. The hair on the back of his neck had been standing on end ever since they'd arrived in the grove. He'd been more than happy to drop back to check out their trail. For no reason he could name this grove of trees gave him the creeps, and he'd been happy to have a few minutes away from it. He wondered what was with John Manson. *The kid had been through a rough time, losin' his squad and all. He was takin' it hard, but there was something about him that bothered Kirby. The kid had a strange look. Maybe it was just those creepy eyes.* With a shrug of the shoulders and a shrug of his mind, the thought was pushed back out of the way so that he could worry about more immediate things.



Avoiding the trail that Cajé had found, one by one the four men dropped down over the lip of the ridge and began their careful descent into the valley. Deep in enemy territory, they moved in silence taking advantage of scraggly pines and low growing bushes to keep under cover whenever possible. Back and forth across the steep slope they worked their way down to the valley floor. Last in line, Saunders' every sense was attuned to their surroundings. He watched his men creeping forward ahead of him, yards apart, following Cajé's lead. Each footfall was placed carefully in a sometimes hopeless attempt to avoid knocking loose rocks skittering down the slope. Finally, after skirting several large boulders that had tumbled from one of the ledges ages ago, the four men slowly slipped and slid all the way to the bottom of the slope where the ravine broadened and flattened out to meet the valley floor.

Saunders signaled a halt and all four men sank down, grateful for the break. The climb down would have been much easier if they could have used the trail. Too easy and too dangerous, it crisscrossed the gentlest part of the slope and was broad enough for two people to walk abreast.

"I feel like a mountain goat," Hart complained softly to himself as he rubbed his aching shin. One slip too many had brought him up hard against a tree trunk.

Adjusting his Thompson back out of the way, Saunders leaned over to inspect Hart's injury. "Do you want me to take a look at that?" If Hart wasn't able to walk on his injured leg, at least he was off the hillside and in a reasonably safe position if they had to leave him behind.

"Nah. I'm okay. It's just a bump. Didn't even break the skin."

Keeping low behind thick cover, the men listened carefully for anything that would give away the presence of the enemy. The only sounds to reach them were the tranquil sounds of nature. From high above them there came a soft rustling as leaves danced in the light breeze which flowed up the valley and swept through the treetops. Birds called to one another from the safety of the trees. A tiny gurgling and dripping announced the presence of a natural spring that erupted from the scree and filled a shallow pool. The overflow babbled its way downhill, out from under the trees and across an open meadow that formed the valley floor. The trail immersed from the overhanging trees slightly to the left of it and followed the stream's wandering course.

Ten minutes later Saunders signaled Cajé to circle around to the left of the bowl-shaped valley. Cajé took a deep breath and then silently released it through pursed lips. The job was tough. One more calming breath and Cajé moved out, keeping to the scrub that grew along the valley's edge.

After a moment, Hart, John Matson, and Saunders followed in Cajé's wake. Within a thousand yards they spotted the trail again. Here it had wandered near the edge of the valley, close enough to

allow Cajé to scrutinize it for scrapes or scuff marks, anything that would indicate that it had been used recently. There was nothing. The earth on the trail was hard packed and bare, the surrounding grass showed no signs of trespass, and the stream gurgled happily in its bed. Quietly he slipped back into the undergrowth where Saunders, Hart, and Matson awaited him.

"No one's used the trail." He shrugged his shoulders. It didn't make sense. He was sure that he'd heard voices. Could he have been wrong?

"You're sure?" Saunders asked. It was more comment than question, and it didn't sit easily with either of them.

Cajé rubbed his jaw in thought. The easy way down into the valley was a well worn trail that snaked back and forth across the hillside. The only other way down was the way they'd come, and that was steep and rugged. Unless you were sneaking around in enemy territory, why would anyone take the route they had?

"We're the only ones that came this way." There was a note of finality in his voice as he gestured back the way they'd come. He gazed at the faces of his companions expecting to see ridicule. They'd trusted him, followed him all this way based only on his belief that he'd heard American voices. He couldn't blame them. John Matson's disappointment was written clearly for all to see, while Hart looked simply resigned. At last Cajé turned to his sergeant. His face was unreadable.

"Sarge, I know I heard voices." Cajé insisted. "I don't know how they got here, but I heard them."

Pushing his cuff out of the way, Saunders consulted his watch. They'd been out a little more than three hours. "We could really use a prisoner about now, or a missing squad," he added. "We'll give it another half hour."

"Right." Cajé responded. The others may doubt him, but the sarge was still firmly behind him.

"Let's move down the valley a little farther."

As they advanced along the curve of the valley the men began to see signs of life, or at least signs of a farm. The trail by the stream had widened out to accommodate the wheels of a farm cart. Here the trees were fewer but taller, and the scrub has been cut back or removed. Across the valley, stone walls had been built that divided the meadow into small, tidy pastures and gardens. The short grass and the smell of fresh dung were indications that livestock has been grazing there recently. Just ahead the late afternoon sun tipped golden the top-most branches of a small apple orchard.

As Cajé paused at the orchard, his sergeant moved up beside him.

"Go around it," he said indicating the slope to their left.

Cajé nodded. It would take longer to move up the steep side of the valley in order to skirt the orchard, but it was the safer way. You never knew what might be lurking in an innocent-seeming orchard, and the cart path on the other side was out of the question.

Small pine trees and thick brush grew on the sides of the valley's bowl offering good cover as well as hand and footholds for the men as they climbed. Up here a steady, refreshing breeze washed over them. It had been absent on the valley floor.

Down on the valley floor, close to where the stream they'd followed met the winding river, stood a perfect small farmstead. The sturdy stone barn and small matching house looked as though they had been there for ages withstanding the tests of time and elements. Next to the river was a narrow roadway, just wide enough for two farm carts to pass. Wildflowers blanketed the riverbank and roadsides then swept uphill to the barn and house. A stone fence surrounded a tidy kitchen garden and blocked the wildflowers' advance. Up the valley on the far side marched measured fields and pastures. Each was neatly outlined with a stone fence. It was a perfect pastoral scene completely untouched by war.

They were part way up the valley wall and halfway past the orchard when Cajé again heard voices. The sound was distorted and he couldn't make out the words. Glancing back at the others, he signaled "listen" and was rewarded with his sergeant's acknowledgement that he'd heard it too.

*Voices.* Saunders crept forward past Johnny Matson. Johnny was hunched down against a pine tree, one boot braced against its trunk as he peered through watering eyes at the orchard. "Wait," Saunders whispered to him as he passed. Several yards beyond Matson was Hart. He too was well braced on the hillside. Again, Saunders whispered, "Wait here. Cover us." Then he moved on to Cajé.

"It's coming from the barn." Cajé informed his sergeant.

Saunders listened carefully. He could make out what sounded like a one-sided conversation. It drifted clearly on the breeze and was definitely coming from the barn. But as clear as it seemed he was unable to make out a single word.

"What's he saying?" Saunders asked quietly, almost to himself.

"I don't know, Sarge," Cajé responded with a shrug. The voice seemed calm and soothing. "Doesn't sound German," he added as an afterthought.

"Let's go." Saunders started forward angling down the slope to intercept the near corner of the barn. Cajé followed at a slightly different angle. Closer to the barn, what had been a monolog turned into a low murmured conversation. Saunders slid along the solid stone wall of the barn until he reached the front corner. Except for a few birds pecking at the ground, the barnyard was empty. A moment later Cajé appeared at the other front corner of the barn. He waited there while Saunders approached the barn door.

"Your..friends..are..here." the calm voice stated pleasantly. "Come in." The words drifted through the open barn door and jolted Saunders right down to his boots. How could the unseen speaker possibly have known that they were outside?! Glancing across at Cajé, it was evident that he too had heard the invitation. Clearly the element of surprise was not on their side! Thompson at the ready, Saunders stepped through the doorway.



In the quiet shade of the grove, long hours of inactivity slowly passed. The men were too restless to sleep and too tired to talk. Littlejohn checked his watch again, for what Kirby thought must surely be the thousandth time.

"Hey, are you gonna quit that?" Kirby asked. He was irritated. The heat of the day was passing, evening was coming on, Saunders wasn't back yet, and this place was really getting to him now.

"Kirby!" Littlejohn whispered, "what's wrong?"

"I dunno. This place gives me the willies." Kirby shifted the BAR slightly and glanced around quickly as though trying to catch the elusive something that was giving him the jitters.

Littlejohn followed Kirby's glance. There was nothing out of the ordinary. There were the usual trees and underbrush. An open field lay before them in this obviously deserted French farmland. A few yards away Billy and Doc were sharing a foxhole, their helmets just barely visible. Beyond them, out on their left flank, Littlejohn knew that Anderson was dug in and keeping watch. Everything was quiet, but it was clear that something had Kirby shook up. Normally Kirby would be baiting him just to pass the time. Littlejohn shrugged his broad shoulders. He couldn't see anything wrong, but Kirby's unease was making Matson's word 'spooked' come to mind.

"You're lettin' your imagination run away with you," Littlejohn responded, though he was feeling jittery too. "Sarge will be back soon," he added as much to comfort himself as to reassure Kirby.

"I'd better call in to the lieutenant."

One foxhole away Billy and Doc crouched in silence. The afternoon was dragging on without so much as a leaf fluttering yet both men were tense; every sense was piqued trying to catch the slightest warning of trouble.

"It feels kinda creepy here," Billy finally whispered. A slight shudder ran through him. He peered around. "Like walkin' in a grave yard," he added.

Doc turned, surprise showing clearly on his face. He'd been thinking those very words and was surprised to hear them uttered. His wanted to deny them. Premonition, superstition, ghost stories. Doc shuddered then shook his head in denial. Lots of soldiers were superstitious. They trusted in all kinds of "lucky" talismans or rituals to get them home. He knew a guy who couldn't go into battle without a stick of gum; lucky rabbit's feet were commonplace. Countless times he'd watched Kirby meticulously clean his BAR, open the breech, gaze down the barrel, and start all over again. Was it simply a nervous habit, or was it a ritual designed to bring luck, to keep him safe? How many times had he been patching up some guy and heard the words "had a gut feeling" used to explain why one guy had only a scratch and the rest



of his unit was dead or why everyone survived? Gut feeling? This time it was his gut and the feeling was, "get out!"

"What? What did you say?"

"Do *you* feel it, Doc?" Billy's face betrayed his concern.

Doc turned to look directly at Billy. He was loath to admit it, but he knew exactly what Billy was talking about. The feeling of unrest had been growing more intense as the day wore on. It was all he could do to remain motionless and quiet in the foxhole.

"Ah don't know Billy. I feel something...odd." Doc hesitated to say what he was thinking. He desperately wanted to get out of the grove, but couldn't come up with a reason for the feeling. Worse yet, he couldn't come up with a reason that would compel Kirby to order a move. He was rescued from further questions by the sudden arrival of Kirby. With a rattle of equipment, Kirby slid into the cramped space behind them.

"How's it goin'?" he asked, slightly out of breath.

"Kirby, how long are we stayin' here? This place gives me the creeps!" Billy exclaimed.

Doc glanced over his shoulder at Kirby and was surprised to see that his face was unexpectedly pale under a heavy sheen of perspiration. The day was hot, but they were in deep shade. Kirby looked decidedly unwell.

"Kirby, are you okay?" Doc asked. Concern deepened the creases across his forehead. Doc momentarily pushed the matter of his own increasing unrest to the back of his mind.

"What? Yeah.....no. I don't know, Doc. Why do you ask?"

Doc's frown deepened as he studied the other man's face. "Kirby, your pale as a ghost!" he exclaimed, then realized that he wasn't too fond of his own choice of words. It matched too closely the unwanted feelings that he'd been experiencing. "You sure you're feelin' alright?"

"I'm okay," Kirby replied but he kept glancing around nervously. "I just wish the sarge would get back."



The barn's interior was cool and dim. A quick look around showed three American soldiers lounging against a stack of hay bales on one side of the clean-swept barn floor. A fourth, wearing bandages about his head, was lying supine nearby. Seated on a bale of hay near the injured man was a smallish, middle-aged Frenchman.

"Wel-come," the man greeted Saunders.

Saunders quickly crossed the barn floor and peered into the dark corners as he responded, "Is anyone else here?"

The Frenchman watched with interest, a pleasant smile gracing his face. When Saunders finally stopped to look directly at him, the man responded, "Wel-come. You are wel-come." His words were curiously accented, and he spoke slowly as though carefully sifting through a limited English vocabulary.

"Uh, thanks," Saunders replied. He moved to the door and beckoned to Cajé.

"Ask him if there's anyone else here."

"Est-ce que n'importe qui est d'autre ici?"

The Frenchman ignored Cajé's question and turned to Saunders. "You are safe here. No other ..men."

Somewhat reassured, Saunders turned his attention to the soldiers. Oddly, not one of them had budged from the hay bales. On closer inspection, each appeared to be in a stupor. Their heads were lolled back against the upper bales, propped in various poses of complete relaxation. Their legs lay stretched out before them, toes tipped to the sides. Their arms lay limply at their sides.



"What happened here? What's wrong with them?" Saunders demanded of anyone who could answer.

Surprisingly, it was a familiar voice that answered. "Who is that?" asked the bandage-wrapped man sharply. He rubbed at his eyes but his hand encountered his bandages.

"Saunders."

Pennington sighed. "I might have known they'd send you. Are you going to get us out of here?" He sat up stiffly, and then moved his arms and legs gingerly to restore the circulation.

"That's why we're here. What happened? What's wrong with your men?"

"My men? Nothing's wrong .." Pennington began, but he was interrupted by the Frenchman.

"Men are fine." At the Frenchman's words, Saunders and Cajé turned to look at the others. All three were yawning and stretching as though they'd been asleep and had just awakened.

..with them." Pennington finished, oblivious to this most curious event.

Saunders glanced at Cajé. He looked perplexed. "Cajé, get Hart and Matson. We're going to need some help." Saunders' uneasiness about the situation was building into urgency. The sooner they were out of here and headed back, the better he'd like it. He had at least a thousand questions but every one of them would wait until they were out of here.

"Can you walk?" Saunders asked Pennington.

"Yeah, I think so." Saunders stepped forward to steady him as Pennington struggled to regain his feet.

"I got him." One of Pennington's men stepped in front of Saunders, took a firm grip on his sergeant's arm and pulled upward.

The man's voice sounded strong and alert. The antithesis of what he'd been only a moment before. The other three men were walking about looking for packs, helmets and rifles that weren't there. They were briefly confused about it, but then seemed to accept their absence as normal. Meanwhile, the Frenchman remained seated on his hay bale, smiling contentedly.

"Sergeant Pennington!! Calabresi!! Willie!! Tom!!" Matson bounced joyfully into the barn and into the welcoming arms of his brothers. His excitement was contagious. It turned the four lost soldiers into an exuberant, joyful, back-slapping crowd.

"Johnny!"

"Matson, how'd you get here?!"

The transformation within the barn was both unsettling and mystifying. Saunders shot a look at Cajé. He had come into the barn immediately behind Matson and had witnessed the alteration. Cajé caught Saunders' look but his face remained set in masklike neutrality. Saunders hoped that his own control was that good.

"Alright, settle down! Settle down!" Saunders called a halt to the greetings. "It'll be dark soon. We've gotta get moving."

Saunders' words grabbed their attention, and all eyes turned toward him. "Cajé, you're on point. Matson, you and...Thyne?" Saunders looked questioningly at the man who was still holding Pennington's arm and got a nod, "you and Thyne will take care of Sergeant Pennington. Hart, Calabresi, Dudley. I'll bring up the rear." Saunders waited a heartbeat to see if his words had gotten through. "Alright, let's move out!"

As Cajé moved past him out the door, Saunders said quietly, "straight up the wagon path."

"Right."

Saunders was relieved when the others followed Cajé through the open door and out into what was left of the late afternoon sun. Before leaving, Saunders turned to the Frenchman to thank him. The small man was still perched on his hay bale; his face was filled with glee as though he'd just received a most wonderful gift.

"Thank you. Merci." said Saunders.

The Frenchman stared at Saunders intently. After a brief pause, he cocked his head slightly and said serenely, "You are wel-come. Good bye."

Saunders acknowledged the other with a half-raised hand, turned and walked out of the barn. His enlarged squad was already moving toward the apple orchard, Cajé in the lead. Behind him, Pennington seemed to be in good hands as Matson and Thyne guided him up the rutted wagon road. Placed in the middle, Hart was alert. The others followed quietly behind as though on a Sunday afternoon stroll.

They were more than halfway up the valley when the sound of hushed arguing drifted back to Saunders. *Not good!* He thought and trotted up the line to discover the problem. As he passed Calabresi and then Dudley, he noted that they were beginning to look more normal. They were watchful and moved like front-line soldiers. Up ahead, Caje had stopped and Saunders waved him off the path and into cover. Hart had stopped as well and watched as Saunders approached him. It was obvious that the situation was getting to him. Stress showed clearly in the lines of his face. As he passed Hart, Saunders said. "Keep an eye on those two," indicating Calabresi and Dudley.

"What's going on?!" Saunders demanded of the three men. They had come to a dead stop in the middle of the wagon road in order to focus on their disagreement. "Take it over there!" He continued with an irritated jerk of his hand toward the trees at the side of the wagon path.

The two men half dragged, half carried, Pennington off the road and under the relative cover of the trees. He didn't resist but was unable to keep on his feet. Saunders followed in their wake and motioned the others in. The argument continued in hushed tones even as they helped Pennington to the ground.

"Bright light? Ah don't remember a bright light!" Johnny insisted. "What? Are you nuts?"

"You were there! You saw it!" Thyne insisted in turn.

"Ah didn't see nothin'! Ah was sleepin' in my foxhole."

"Don't you remember the wind?"

"It blew around in a circle!"

"No, it blew straight across that cursed meadow!"

"It blew so hard, it ripped my rifle right out of my hands!"

In sharp contrast to their earlier state, now anger and stress showed in every movement of the men from the missing squad. Tom Dudley and Tony Calabresi, in their need to correct such obvious errors, jumped into the heated exchange. Angry quarrelling ensued with reddened faces and doubled fists.

"...that humming noise...it didn't hum, it howled...it came straight from the sky...had to be some new German air craft...don't know nothin' that makes that kinda noise...it hovered over us...musta been a rocket....rockets don't hover...it zig and zagged...no, it went straight up..."

Even as Saunders jumped to separate the men before the argument came to blows, Pennington, from where he lay on the ground was yelling at his men to stop. Caje, quick as a cat, was there to back up his sergeant while Hart grabbed Pennington by the shoulders and dragged him back out of the way. Like a spring coiled to the breaking point, Saunders grabbed the shirt fronts of two of the contenders and roared, "Sit down and shut up!" Jerked forward and down by the powerful downward thrust of Saunders' arms, Calabresi and Matson landed side by side on the ground with a thump! Using his momentum, Saunders whirled on Dudley, dropping him neatly beside the others, "And that goes for you, too!"

The fight gone completely out of him, Willie Thyne sank down silently beside his squad mates with Caje's hand still wrapped firmly in his shirt front.

The four combatants sat in shocked silence, now guarded by Saunders' men. Unexpectedly, Johnny took out his cloth square and wiped his rheumy eyes in what was the only bit of normalcy in the whole situation. Saunders glared at the group, his mind working furiously; his thousand questions were begging to be answered, but not here or now. Something very odd happened to these men, some common experience that each perceived differently, but that wasn't his problem. It was only a complication to his job, and his job was to get back to his men and get them all back home.

"Look, something happened to you. You can't explain it; neither can I." Saunders had their attention and intended to keep it. "We were sent out here to find you. That's half the job. Now we have to get back; take what you know back to Headquarters. We'll let them figure this out." In the failing light, Saunders could just make out nods of resigned agreement.

"We've got to get back and pick up the rest of my squad."



"Back where?" When Pennington finally spoke up, there was a slight quaver to his voice that didn't bode well.

"To your old position."

"NO! No, we can't go back there!" Pennington declared vehemently.

Looking closely, Saunders saw fear...no, terror... on the faces of the lost squad. It made his blood run cold. Something very bad happened to these men. And it happened exactly where his unsuspecting squad was dug in. Suddenly Saunders was torn between disbelief and the possibility that his men could be in danger. If there is even a slight chance that this is real....we have to get back to the men!

Caje, a dark fear in the pit of his stomach, beckoned his sergeant aside, "Sarge," Caje's voice was barely a whisper, "that Frenchman back there... he didn't speak French!"

Saunders looked at him incredulously. "Are you sure?" He asked, even as he played back in his mind the odd events that led them to this moment.

Caje went on hurriedly, "These things, strange lights in the sky...back home... in the bayou. Sarge, the people who see them, they are never the same after. We gotta get back to the guys."

"Have *you* seen 'em? Do you know what it is?" For the first time, Saunders considered that what they were dealing with could be well beyond the experience of any of them.

"We gotta get back!" Caje repeated urgently.

"We're going back to get my men." Saunders said with finality. "Caje. Point." Glaring at the men on the ground, Saunders growled, "Not a word." Then, pointing to Pennington, "Carry him!"

Move out!" Caje moved out, followed by Thyne and Calabresi carrying Pennington between them with Dudley behind. Saunders and Hart brought up the rear, following close on the heels of John Matson. Matson's face was closed off, and his body bespoke his anger. Who or what he was angry at was a mystery.

Despite the improbability of the situation, Saunders had sized it up and there was no other choice but to get everyone back to where the rest of Saunders' squad waited. What, if anything, awaited them there was a separate problem, but an unreasoning fear stirred in the pit of his belly.

After what seemed like an eternity, Caje finally topped the ridge and moved to the edge of the meadow. Pennington's men followed reluctantly. Dusk had come early to the valley; the sides of its bowl blocked the light. But it was even darker up here. Murky clouds were gathered low, and the air felt close and electrical, as though a thunderstorm approached. Wind whipped the tree branches overhead. As Saunders came forward, the men silently shifted out of his path. Their fear was almost a living thing, and he was the harsh taskmaster who made them face it. He didn't have time to spare for their mindless fear. He'd caught their contagion but his gut-wrenching fear was for Kirby, Doc, Littlejohn, and the rest of his squad. They were his charges, his family in this madness of war. He needed to take care of them, to keep them safe.

Saunders made to move forward but before he could take a step, Caje caught his arm and pointed skyward. In the space of a heartbeat, a lighted object appeared in the darkened sky some distance to the east. Suddenly, it zipped a zigzag course and then came to a stop, hovering over the trees at the far side of the meadow. From behind him, Saunders heard gasps and a groan, and his own heart seemed to flip over then drop like a stone into his stomach. Whatever it was, the object was hovering over the spot where he'd left his men! As quickly as it appeared, the object rocketed away, making no noise that could be heard over the whipping wind.

It had all happened so quickly! There'd been no time to warn his men, no time to fire a shot. Yet now it was completely dark! Saunders stared in disbelief. The whole scene had seemed to last only a few seconds, but so much had changed. The air had freshened, and the wind had died down; the moon was rising. Saunders shook his head to clear it and looked around. Caje still stood next him; he could feel Caje's grip on his arm. It was too dark to be sure, but he hoped that Caje was not still pointing at the sky; that would be too much to stand. Pennington, Matson, Calabresi, Dudley, and Thyne were on the





ground as though they had taken cover from ...from what? Something very strange had just occurred and he had no explanation. Saunders left that thought alone. Instinctively, he knew that if he pursued it now it could consume him as it had consumed Pennington and the others.

"Caje!" Saunders urgent whisper shook Caje from what appeared to be some sort of dream. He awakened with a start as though startled from sleep.

"What? What happened?"

"We'll talk about it later. We've got to get to the squad!"

Caje mentally shook himself. Whatever had just happened, it would wait; the sarge needed his help. Turning around to get his bearings, Caje was amazed to find the five men on the ground behind him. "What about them?" he asked?

Saunders was reluctant to leave them in their current state, but was anxious to get to where his men were dug in 500 yards away.

"Leave 'em here for now. Hart, stay with 'em. If they wake up, keep them quiet. Caje and I will get the squad." He added the last with more confidence than he felt. "We'll be back as soon as we can." With that, Saunders checked his weapon, settled his helmet, and started off across the meadow. Moving silently and keeping a low profile, Caje followed in his wake.

Though it was still low in the sky, the moon's light made the crossing easy. As he approached the woods on the far side Saunders called out the password, and prayed that he'd hear the counter-sign. Nothing. He called again, a little louder this time.

From far off to his left, Saunders heard something. He waited, straining eyes and ears for some sign of life. Several moments passed.

"Sarge? Is that you?" queried Billy Nelson.

Saunders' sigh of relief was nearly audible; his body sagged as some of the tension left it. He and Caje changed course and headed toward Billy. When they entered the woods, Saunders' squad gathered around them. They were dug in several hundred yards from their original position, but Billy Nelson and Littlejohn, who shared the camouflaged foxhole closest to the edge of the grove, had spotted the two men crossing the meadow in the moonlight.

"Gosh, Sarge! Did you see it?" Billy asked excitedly. "We woulda been goners! It went right over top of where we were!!" Billy's excitement echoed through the group. Abandoning their positions, the squad gathered around their sergeant and Caje. Thoughts and questions flew, "What was it, Sarge? Some new German weapon? If we hadn't moved it woulda got us all!"

"Am I glad to see you!" exclaimed Kirby, giving voice to what everyone else was thinking.

"Hold it down," Saunders admonished, motioning them down with both hands. He squatted down and faced them. "I don't know what it was," he began, and motioned for silence as the uproar began again. "Is everybody okay?"

Doc spoke up for the first time, "We're okay Sarge, thanks to Kirby." Concern etched his face. "I don't know where we'd be ...," his voice trailed off.

"It's okay, Doc." It was the only reassurance he had to offer.

"I don't know why you moved the squad, Kirby, but I'm glad you did! I'll need a full report when we get back."

Saunders glanced from face to face. He had everyone's attention. "We found Sergeant Pennington and his squad. They're just inside the tree line over there." Saunders pointed back across the field. "Hart's keeping an eye on them, but he's gonna need help getting them over here." He hesitated, unsure of how much to tell them. None of it was easy to handle, but the look on Doc's face made him continue. "Something happened to them." Saunders paused, and then added, "Probably the 'something' that didn't happen to you.

Before conversation could start again, Saunders went on, "They need our help! Kirby, take the squad and get everybody back here. Doc, do whatever you can for them. Make sure everybody gets some of that chocolate Kirby scrounged. It'll help." He paused to look at his men, and then added, "We're going home." Saunders' 'business as usual' response to the weirdest thing any of them had ever experienced, went far to restore everyone's equilibrium. There was a job to do, and the sarge wanted them to do it.

"Right Sarge. But, where are *you* goin'?" Kirby asked suspiciously. It had been a harrowing day, and he was happy to relinquish the responsibility of keeping everyone alive. He didn't want it back.

"I need to check it out." Saunders answered with a nod of his head toward their former position.

"I'll go with you," interjected Cajé. He needed to see this for himself. He'd heard the wild stories that voodoo women told about strange lights over the bayou. A part of him rejected the stories out of hand, but this was just too close to home to be ignored.

The two men approached the site with caution. Moonlight flooded the area, casting strange and eerie shadows. Saunders shook off the creepy feeling that insisted on crawling up his spine. The area under the trees looked much as it had when they'd first seen it earlier in the day. The abandoned foxholes stood in an uneven row concealed behind the brush that his men had added. Moving carefully, they separated and continued their reconnaissance.

"Cajé! Look at this!" Twenty yards beyond the foxholes was a huge crater. Twelve feet across and as many deep, with loose earth piled along the rim and scattered around the edge as though something had been forcibly pulled out of the ground and the displaced earth was left to fall where it would. Nothing else was disturbed. The two men stared in wonder and tried to not think the thoughts that forced their way in.

Finally Saunders broke the long silence that had stretched between them. "I think Pennington's squad just got in the way," he said quietly. For now, neither cared to ask, "In the way of what?"



Three men sat around a large, exquisitely carved, mahogany table. A thick report in a plain envelope lay before them.

"Eisenhower wants to know if the Germans have a new aircraft, a secret weapon. What should I tell him?"

Patting the report, the man at the head of the table responded, "Tell him it was nothing. Tell him it was swamp gas."



### *Epilog*

Dawn was streaking the horizon, brightening the room. Out in the field, the cows were beginning to stir and would soon be at the pasture gate. His latest letter completed, the man laid his pen aside and then carefully folded the thin, lined paper and stuffed it into its envelope. The postman would carry it to its destination somewhere in Washington; maybe this time he would receive a real answer. Maybe this time someone would explain.

The End