

BROKEN

By
EPM



Thank you to Doc II for reading my story. The Combat characters do not belong to me.

< > Dialogue in French

Saunders could feel the tremor in his hands as he tried to hold the field glasses steady. He watched as the American artillery bombarded the advancing German line. From his vantage point on the ridge, he saw the enemy scatter from the hell that rained down around them. Mission accomplished: locate the advancing enemy troops and call in the coordinates to HQ. First squad had done what was asked of them. Now they were pulling back until the artillery finished doing their job. They would leave the same way they came. The narrow entrance that led them into the valley would lead them back out. The only difference was that Cajé and Kirby wouldn't be going with them. The sergeant squeezed his eyes shut against the pictures that were swimming before his mind's eye.

Saunders took the point, a position that allowed him to be alone. No wonder Cajé liked ... The thought of the lost man felt like a physical blow. He stumbled and pulled in a quick gasp of air. Remorse and bitterness churned his insides. He'd lost men before but this time he'd allowed himself to get too close. He had sworn after Grady died it would never happen again. He would pay for his mistake, but not now. Right now, he'd get the rest of them back and report to Hanley. After that...

Hanley allowed himself a rare, quiet moment. The radio wasn't squawking at him, and he was alone in the HQ. He wrapped both hands around his cup and took a moment to savor the steaming, dark brew. Saunders' squad had succeeded in calling in the coordinates for the artillery strike and they were on their way back. He was glad for both. In the momentary peace, he allowed his thoughts to stray toward home.

Approaching footsteps stopped the images. He pulled himself to his feet and waited, hoping it was Saunders. Hanley wasn't quick enough to hide the shock that froze on his face when the noncom walked into the tented headquarters. The ragged shadow that stood before him bore little resemblance to the soldier who had left at 0600 this morning. Hollow, empty eyes stared out of an expressionless face.

"Saunders — what is it?"

The sergeant stood at attention, delivering his report with little inflection. "We found the advancing troops as ordered. When we left, the artillery had a direct line of fire and the enemy was scattered. We should be able to advance our position as soon as the spotters give the ok." Saunders stopped, momentarily dropping his gaze to the floor. With a small shake of his head, he looked back at his lieutenant and continued. "PFC Paul LeMay and Private William Kirby are missing in action—resumed dead." Saying it aloud made it real, made it official. The tension that was holding him upright, faded. Now all he wanted to do was sleep.

“Saunders, I’m...” Before the lieutenant could finish, Saunders asked to be dismissed. A spark of anger flared in Hanley. No, he didn’t want to dismiss the man. He wanted an explanation and a part of him was hurt at the sergeant’s rebuff but he knew that he’d probably get a clearer picture after Saunders rested.

“You’re dismissed but we’ll continue this conversation later.” Hanley winced at the sound of his own voice. He hadn’t meant to come across so harshly.

“Yes sir.” Saunders turned and walked into the fading afternoon light.

Hanley sat down hard and slumped back into the chair. God, Caje and Kirby—losing either of them would be a blow but *both* of them? The lieutenant knew first squad would be completely demoralized and Saunders would suffer the most. He rubbed his temples against the exploding headache. *When would this lousy, stinking war ever end?*

For once, Doc chose to be alone. There were soldiers who needed mending but hearts weren’t his specialty. Besides, this time it was different. Who’d be there to listen to him? Who’d say the words to him that he had said to so many others, *he didn’t suffer, he’s at peace now* and all the other empty platitudes that were in his arsenal. He turned his face into the stiff wind that blew in from the south. He could smell rain on the air.

Caje and Kirby, Caje and Kirby... Doc’s mind rang with the sound of their names. Two men, who on the surface seemed so opposite in background and temperament. Kirby’s thoughts and feelings stood on the surface acting as both armor and barrier. Cage, on the other hand, held his emotions and opinions close, in deep and not easily reached. Nevertheless, this unlikely duo thrived in each other’s company, in battle or out.

The promised rain began to fall in wind driven torrents. The medic looked up into a sky that no longer held any light. Who’d help him make sense of it?

Billy couldn’t help but stare at the sleeping sergeant. Saunders had come back from reporting in and hadn’t said a word. He just lay down and turned his back to everyone. Before long, the deep, even breaths told the young private that the NCO was asleep.

“How can he do that? How can he just come in and go to sleep like that?” Billy’s voice cracked with the feelings he’d managed to hold on to until now.

"I don't know, Billy but the Sarge feels worse than anybody about what happened. Look at his eyes." For some reason, Littlejohn felt as if he needed to defend the sleeping man.

Billy sighed and leaned his back against the cold stone of the barn's foundation. "Funny, I was gonna say I didn't see anything in his eyes. They looked dead, ya know, empty like." He hesitated while he searched for the right words to convey what he saw.

"It may look that way but I know the Sarge and he's hurting bad about what happened and blaming himself too." Littlejohn paused. "If you think it's bad for us to lose Cajé and Kirby, think about what it's doing to him. I'd want to sleep too."

"I can't believe they're both gone." The sound of Billy's voice matched his young years. He shivered against the invading dampness.

"Can't imagine a day without Kirby complaining." Littlejohn's smile soon disappeared. "Can't believe I'll really miss it."

"Yeah and no Cajé out front. We all just sorta took it for granted that Cajé would help keep us out of trouble. Who'll take the point now?"

Both men became lost in their own thoughts until they too slipped into a restless slumber.

The first thing he felt was the rain as it pelted down on his head. The cold liquid ran in sheets off the side of his face. Every layer he wore was soaked through, causing him to shake in violent fits. Cajé opened his eyes only to look up into the pitch-black night. A soft groan escaped as he tried to move off his back and onto his right side. He searched his mind trying to remember where he was and what had happened.

Slowly, the disjointed pieces began to slide together. They had been caught out front, too close when the American guns opened up. Cajé remembered the landscape being picked up by the conflagration and transformed into the rubble that now lay around him. *They, they?* His head began to pound. Then the last piece fell into place. *It was Kirby. Kirby had been with him.* He tried harder to get off his back, rolling to the left this time. He came to rest on his stomach, lying flat on the saturated earth.

The Cajun wiped the rain and mud from his eyes and squinted into the distance. Nothing, he couldn't see anything, he didn't hear anything but the rain. He tentatively reached out with both hands hoping to steady himself enough so that he could sit up. His left hand hit something. It was a boot. Fighting his way to his

knees, Cajé pushed a hand up along the man's side. He stopped. The warm, sticky wetness he felt contrasted with the cold of the rain. He didn't need a light to see that the man beneath his hands was bleeding heavily.

Cajé's numbed fingers fumbled trying to get the lighter out of his jacket. Finally, the spark of the wheel caught the fluid and a flame rose up, pushing away a small portion of the darkness. He hunched over the precious light guarding it against the rain. Reaching out again, his hand came to rest on the soldier's chest. He felt the upward movement of muscles straining to bring in air.

The little light was enough to illuminate the pale features of his lost squad mate. Cajé dropped his head to his chest whispering a grateful < Thank you, Holy Mother>. The lighter sputtered and went out, leaving the men once again in darkness.

As he pulled a bandage from his web belt, Cajé felt around until he found the wound. He did his best to pack the injury and tie off the dressing. He knew his friend needed more but there was nothing he could do until dawn. Suddenly, he was very tired and his side arched. The exhausted scout lay down behind Kirby, pulling him close. He wrapped an arm over the wounded man's chest hoping what little body heat he could share would keep Kirby alive until morning.

Cajé closed his eyes. He rested his forehead on his friend's back and murmured an almost forgotten prayer to St. Jude. The drumming of the rain drowned out his voice.

Hanley finally gave up and hauled his long frame up from the cot. Sleep's brief respite had been denied him. The officer reached for his lighter and a cigarette. Breathing deeply, he took solace in that initial pull as the smoke released its first hit of the day.

He waited. Saunders needed to tell him more and Hanley needed to see how this was affecting his squad leader. The NCO was his best but even seasoned veterans could be broken. He wondered if this was the proverbial last straw.

Hanley lifted his head just as the tent flaps parted. Sergeant Saunders came in and stood at attention. "All right Saunders, at ease. Did you get any sleep?"

The NCO relaxed his posture and responded, "Yes sir." The expressionless face held no hint as to what might lay beneath.

The lieutenant let out a deep breath. His shoulders slumped as he sat on the corner of his desk. He knew Saunders and the man would handle this on his own

terms. He wasn't going to give in, not to him and not to anyone else. "Tell me what happened."

"We reached the valley outlined on the map. A narrow inlet led to open fields. The hillsides sloped up to high ridges on either side. The far end of the area was heavily forested." Saunders stood with his hands behind his back and his feet slightly apart, anchoring himself to the spot. He continued.

"Ain't we there yet, Sarge? My dogs are talking to me." Kirby hoped to sound pathetic enough for Saunders to feel sorry for him.

"Just keep walking, Kirby and ignore the barking." Saunders snuck a sideways glance at Doc and was rewarded with a grin that covered the medic's face.

Kirby continued to grumble, his own voice offering the comfort that no one else would.

Finally, Saunders called a halt as Cajé returned from point. "We're walking straight into some thick woods up there, Sarge. Anything or anybody could hide in there and you'd have a hard time spotting them."

Saunders knew this would be an ideal route for the Germans. Once they penetrated the forest, Allied artillery would have a hard time finding them and an even harder time blasting them out of there. "Headquarters needs to know where the Germans are advancing. Squads from K Company are spread out all around this area. Our job is to clear this valley and those woods."

"We could be walkin' right into it and never know it." Littlejohn was surprised when he heard his own voice. It was a comment he meant to keep in his head.

"Our job is to keep a whole lot of American soldiers from walking into it. Cajé, Kirby, you go in on the right. Nelson, Littlejohn, take the left. Doc you get up on that side hill. Take the radio with you." Saunders pointed to a high point on the right. "I'll go down the middle. Do not engage. We are to spot the enemy and radio in the coordinates. We will meet back at Doc's position in 45 minutes. Any questions?" There were none. "Let's go."

"Cajé was right. The forest was overgrown with vines and thick briar bushes. It was hard to walk, let alone see too far ahead. I scouted as far as I could before it was time to head back. I exited the wooded area and joined Doc on the hillside."

"Geez Littlejohn, I can hardly walk in this stuff. The vines keep grabbin' my ankles." Billy's short legs churned against the thick vegetation.

“Well, you better pick’um up and put’um down cause it’s past time we were meetin up with the Sarge and Doc. And I for one don’t want to get chewed out. I’d rather leave that pleasure to Kirby.”

Soon the two soldiers broke free and headed toward the rendezvous point.

“Anything?” Saunders asked.

“No Sarge, we didn’t see anything but trees and bushes,” Littlejohn replied.

Billy looked around. Caje and Kirby were nowhere in sight. “I guess we aren’t the only ones who are late.” Littlejohn gave him an exasperated look that clearly said, don’t remind the man.

Saunders checked his watch. “Ok, let’s get up higher. Maybe we’ll spot something from up there.”

It didn’t take long for the four men to reach the top of the ridge. They were high enough to see over the top of the tree line and into the next valley. Saunders pulled out his field glasses.

“I saw the advancing enemy line moving up through the open area beyond the woods. Our mission was to call in the location of those troops and I knew I had to do it before they were sheltered in the forest. It had been over 60 minutes since I sent Caje and Kirby in. I made the decision to call in the coordinates at that time.”

Hanley stood up again. He took on the same formal demeanor as Saunders. “Did you feel, Sergeant Saunders, that you could not wait any longer for your men to clear the woods and return as ordered?”

“It was my best judgment that the artillery needed to strike before the Germans had time to get into the woods. It was a matter of weighing two lives against the possibility of many more.”

“And you think there is no chance that Caje and Kirby may be alive?”

Saunders finally looked at his lieutenant instead of through him. “When the shelling started, part of the woods was destroyed. If Caje and Kirby were in there, the chances of their survival are nil.”

“Alright Saunders, is there anything else?” Hanley’s soft voice was laced with sadness for himself, for what was left of first squad but mostly for the man who stood before him.

“No Sir, nothing else.”

“We’ll be pulling out again soon. Put your squad on notice.” Hanley hesitated. “I’ve requested replacements. They should be here soon.”

“Yes Sir, is that all?”

“That’s all. You’re dismissed.” He waited until the noncom started for the opening, then said, “Saunders, I’m sorry.” The sergeant hesitated for a moment then slipped through the tent flaps.

It was his own shivering that woke the Cajun up. The rain had stopped but thick, gray clouds were still blocking the sun. It took a moment for his mind to lose its own cloudiness, and another moment until he felt a steady heart beat beneath his hand. Kirby’s heart beat. He struggled to his knees.

“Kirby, wake up. It’s me, Cajé.” He gently shook the injured man’s arm. “Come on now; you’ve got to help me. We have to get out of here.”

His persistence was rewarded with a low groan and lids that blinked open. It took a moment for Kirby to focus. “Cajé, that you—what the hell happened?”

“The world exploded and we were in the middle of it.” The scout pulled back the jacket that covered Kirby’s dressing. The blood that marred the surface had dried to a deep blackish-red. “You think you can walk with some help?”

“Well, unless you grew a pair of wings, I guess I ain’t got a choice.” Kirby grimaced as Cajé pulled him upright. His left hand pushed deep into his side trying to drive away the pain.

Miraculously, Cajé’s rifle had survived although Kirby’s BAR was nowhere in sight. Taking his injured friend’s weight caused LeMay to grimace with his own pain. He took a moment to get his bearings than he settled Kirby on one side and his M1 on the other. They had been headed back to rendezvous with Saunders when the nightmare began. Now he had no idea if the battle had drawn new lines but it didn’t really matter. Even if it did, he had no idea where those lines were. “Come on, we’ll head back the way we came.” *And pray*, he thought.

The steel grey morning did nothing to improve the mood of the men of the first squad. On the way back and last night, shock had been the overriding emotion. Now with dawn’s cold light, reality had settled in. Each man felt somehow diminished by the loss of the other two. The whole had unraveled. It had come apart when the shells burst through the German lines, taking part of the woods, Cajé, and Kirby with them.

Those remaining stood when Lieutenant Hanley entered the barn. “Saunders, your replacements are here. Privates Reynolds and Oliver, this is your squad leader, Sergeant Saunders.” He introduced the others—“that’s Doc, Littlejohn and Nelson.” The men nodded to the newcomers.

Hanley motioned for Saunders to join him outside. “The whole company is pushing forward. The artillery did their job, now it’s our turn.” He saw Saunders wince and realized he was thinking of the men he had lost to that artillery. “Your squad will move along the same lines as you did yesterday. Search out any Krauts that may still be scattered in that area then push on to L’Aigle. We’ll meet there by 1500 tomorrow. Any questions?”

“No sir.” Saunders turned away.

The noncom was startled when he heard Hanley’s voice again. “Look Saunders, I know losing Cajé and Kirby is tough on you but you made the only decision you could.”

Saunders remained silent.

“You can’t let it eat at you.”

“No sir, is there anything else?”

“Yes, Sergeant, there is.” Hanley’s anger and frustration seeped through his usually cool demeanor. “You keep this bottled up inside and you’re going to explode and that puts the mission and your men in danger. No matter what your personal feelings are, they are second to your job and those men. Do I make myself clear, Saunders?”

“Yes sir, Very clear.”

“Dismissed Sergeant!” Hanley watched as Saunders led his men out of the compound. A long, slow breath escaped, taking the tension out of his shoulders. He’d seen Saunders angry before. He’d seen him on the very edge of losing himself to the malevolence that bombarded them day in and day out, but he’d never seen him like this. That singular piece inside the man that made him the best squad leader in the company was broken. Shattered by that last straw. Hanley turned away from the retreating squad. He was tired, just so tired of it all.

“No more Cajé. I can’t do it.” Most of Kirby’s weight now rested on the scout’s lean frame. “Just hide me somewhere and go on. You can’t get me back alone.” The private’s words were stilted and came in between short gasps for breath.

They had cleared the devastated part of the forest and moved back into what was left of the thick trees. Cajé gently placed Kirby on a mossy bed beneath a stand of oaks. Carefully, he pulled back his jacket and shirt. The once dried stain was now overlaid with fresh bleeding. Taking a new dressing from his belt, Cajé pressed it onto the wound. Kirby bucked upward.

Cajé's head dropped. He found comfort in the soft flowing sounds of his first language. <I'm sorry, my friend. Hold on.> When Kirby abruptly stopped struggling, Cajé's heart skipped a beat. His body sagged with relief when he saw Kirby looking back at him. The backs of the scout's long fingers brushed the side of his friend's face. "Rest, mon ami—just rest." The private's lids slid shut.

The Cajun took a moment to look around. The acid smell of rotting pine needles and leaves mixed with the remnants of the exploding shells, leaving the air heavy with the scent of decay. They had been caught on the edge of the artillery barrage, their own artillery. One of the other squads must have spotted the Kraut line advancing and called it in. Immersed in his own thoughts, he barely heard his friend's faint call.

"You gonna make me lay on this wet ground all day?" Kirby's mouth curled upward. The familiar teasing brought Cajé back to the moment.

Cajé smiled back. "I thought you couldn't make it any farther?"

"You musta heard wrong. How about giving a buddy some help?" Kirby reached out. Lines of dried blood and dirt covered the outstretched hand.

Cajé pulled upward, and once more, the two men headed for the tree line then onto the valley floor. They had not gone far when the sound of men speaking brought them to an abrupt halt. Kirby lifted his head and looked at Cajé. German—apparently, they weren't the only survivors.

Being careful to make as little noise as possible, Cajé helped the injured man behind a shield of wild grapevines. The thick branches twisted around a single tree and threatened to strangle it. Kirby gritted his teeth and splinted his wounded side with both hands, swallowing a low groan.

Cajé's M1 peeked out from between the gnarled limbs. He could see four men parallel to their position. One pointed in the direction of the decimated woods. Somehow, these men were caught out front, just as he and Kirby had been. He spared a quick glance at his friend. Kirby lay on his right side with his knees drawn up. His eyes were open and he nodded his understanding when Cajé held up four fingers. They both waited, hoping the enemy would pass them by.

Suddenly, the sound of men pushing through the dense vegetation startled everyone. The Germans dropped immediately, straining to see who was coming toward them.

LeMay looked at Kirby and placed a finger to his lips. As he started to get up from his knees, a sharp pain caught him unaware. He grabbed at his side and held on until he could get his breath back. Even with the weather's chill, the sweat formed on his brow and upper lip. Wiping it away, Cajé tried to concentrate.

The breaks between the trees allowed Cajé a glimpse of GI issue but his relief was short lived. The German patrol lay in wait for the approaching men. Whoever they were, they were walking into a trap. Doing the only thing he could think of, he took careful aim and squeezed the trigger.

The sound of the single shot sent the men of first squad to the ground. Saunders signaled the others to stay put while he crawled forward. Rapid fire rent the morning air but none of it was coming their way. The sergeant's momentary confusion caused him to stop. He wasn't sure who or how but someone was in trouble. He moved forward. Lying hidden behind a half-rotted stump, he could see the German patrol firing off to their right. Rounds from a single M1 returned fire.

Saunders crawled backward until he was with his men. "There's a Kraut patrol ahead, four men. They're firing off to their right. Littlejohn, Oliver, flank them on the left. Move out now. Nelson, Reynolds, you're on me. We'll go down the middle. Doc, you stay here."

He waited until he could no longer see Littlejohn and Oliver. "Ok, move out." Once more, the NCO crawled forward until all three men were flattened out next to each other in the dense underbrush. They could see the enemy firing into a thicket. The return fire was less frequent now and Saunders knew whoever was in there was probably running out of ammunition.

"Now!" Saunders shouted. The Thompson came alive, spraying bullets at the unsuspecting troops. Nelson and Reynolds joined in.

Littlejohn and Oliver had slipped in close behind the small patrol. Littlejohn reached into his jacket and pulled out a grenade, signaling for Oliver to do the same. On a silent count of three, the two men rose up together, pulled the pins and threw the small bombs.

The explosion silenced the remaining gunfire. The Americans rushed forward. They checked the enemy, knowing that none could have survived the simultaneous blasts.

The squad moved off to see who had taken on the German patrol. When they cleared the tangled vines, they saw a GI sitting with his back against a tree. He was looking down at another man whose head lay in his lap, his hand unconsciously stroking the injured man's face. The soft words of comfort murmured in French told them all what they needed to know.

Raising his head, Cajé looked up. "Sarge?"

Doc, Littlejohn and Nelson ran forward. Doc gently removed Kirby from Cajé's care.

"I can't, you're really..." Billy stumbled over his own excitement. He held onto Cajé's shoulder, afraid if he let go, the specter before him might disappear.

"I think what Billy's trying to say," Littlejohn took over, "is that we can't believe you're really alive." He suddenly averted his eyes. "Well, I mean after the shelling and all."

Cajé had not moved from the tree. A smile lit up his tired eyes. "When we ran into that Kraut patrol, I thought we were done for."

The sergeant's sharp orders broke through the reunion. "Nelson, Littlejohn, make a litter for Kirby. Reynolds, Oliver, security." He walked to where Doc bent over his patient. "Doc?"

"He's got a piece of shrapnel buried in his left side. There isn't much I can do for him out here. What he needs is a hospital." The medic finished tying off a thick, padded dressing. "I gave him something for pain."

Kirby looked up through the thickening veil that crept in from the edges of his vision. He smiled. "Hey, Sarge, guess you thought you'd never see old William G. again. But here I am and I ain't goin' nowhere." Kirby's voice faded as his lids slid shut. He didn't see the small shudder that ran through Saunders' body.

Saunders stood above Cajé as the young scout relayed what happened to them since they had entered the woods the day before. "The last thing I remember, after Kirby and I started back, was everything exploding around us. I don't remember anything else until I woke up during the night."

Caje winced as he tried to move into a more comfortable position. His hand automatically reached to splint his ribs.

“You hurt?”

Knowing it wouldn't do any good to lie, Caje replied, “It's my ribs, just a little bruising.”

“Doc will take a look.” Without another word, Saunders left Caje to check on Reynolds and Oliver.

The Cajun watched his sergeant walk away. Something was wrong. He had known Saunders too long and too well not to notice the difference in the man. Something had happened.

The trip to L'Aigle was long and arduous. Part way back, Caje collapsed. The bruising had expanded to cover his entire right side. Doc knew Caje was carrying some cracked ribs but he had underestimated the scout's stoic reserve. He had brushed Doc off saying he was fine, just a little sore. Now the medic realized the extent of the bleeding and wondered how much damage lay beneath.

The patrol of six that Hanley sent out had turned into eight and although the two prodigal sons were injured, their reappearance was nothing short of a miracle. Both men vanished into the field hospital Company had set up that morning.

Saunders reported in. “We ran into one small Kraut patrol. They were engaged so it allowed us to circle around back of them. Two grenades were enough.” The NCO removed his helmet and shook out his thick hair.

Hanley looked puzzled. “They were engaged---who was in your sector?”

Saunders stood a little straighter. “It was Caje and Kirby, Sir. They're both alive, hurt but alive. Doc took them to the hospital.”

Hanley's face lit up with the news. “My God, they're alive?” He didn't try to hide the grin. “But how did they---what happened?”

Saunders took a step backward and relayed Caje's story.

Hanley lost his smile. “Do they know?”

“No, Sir, not yet. I'll tell them myself.”

Hanley thought he detected a note of melancholy in the squad leader's voice.

“They’ll understand Saunders. It was their lives weighed against countless others.”

“Will they, lieutenant? Would you, if somebody made the decision to sacrifice your life?”

Doc sat between the cots that held Cajé and Kirby. He watched as the viscous plasma made its way down through the narrow tubing and into Kirby’s vein. The wounded soldier had already been given two units of whole blood but the surgeons felt his volume still needed to be stabilized. They had removed the offending shrapnel and sewn layers of vessels, fat and muscle back into place. He had been lucky, other than the wound itself and the blood loss; time was the only thing he needed to be himself again.

Cajé’s luck had also held. Although he had several broken ribs, the underlying damage didn’t include a punctured lung or a lacerated liver. He’d be in pain for a significant time; they both would but they’d live to fight another day. The medic was willing to take whatever the doctors said as long as they were going to live.

Cajé was the first to stir. A few hours of uninterrupted sleep had eased some of the harsh lines from his face. He looked up to see the medic sitting next to him. Somehow, he wasn’t surprised.

“Doc---how is Kirby?”

Nor was Doc surprised when Cajé’s first question was to ask about Kirby. “He’s doing ok. Just look over this way a little.” Doc tipped his chair back and motioned toward the private’s bed.

Cajé tried to push himself up onto his elbows but couldn’t hold the position for long. “He doesn’t look so good to me. Will he be alright?” The dark, intense eyes squinted with worry and the lines that had softened were back.

“The doctors think he’ll be just fine. He needs some time to heal, just like you do.” Doc watched as Cajé relaxed back into his cot. “They’re shipping you both back to recover for a few weeks.”

“A few weeks?” Cajé couldn’t help thinking of clean sheets, hot food and maybe even hotter water. “I wouldn’t argue with a few weeks.” He smiled at the pictures in his head. War made the little things seem so much more precious.

“You two are a walkin` miracle.” Doc shook his head with the wonder of it. “God knows how you made it out of that mess.”

“Somebody must have been watching over us. I can’t think of any other reason that we got out of there.” Cajé gave a small cough that caused him to grab at his ribs. His face lost its color and sweat broke out on his forehead.

“Easy now, Cajé. You’d better not talk any more.” The medic stood up. “I’ll go see if you can have something more for the pain.”

Cajé mumbled a faint *thanks Doc*.

A nurse came to the scout’s bedside. She smiled at him through weary eyes and injected the morphine before he knew it. They hadn’t strapped his ribs yet so the bruising could be monitored. She folded Cajé’s blanket back and inspected the injury. “I don’t see any new bruising. It looks as if the bleeding has stopped.” She tucked the blanket back into place.

Cajé mustered a brilliant smile and said, “Thank you, Miss. You are very kind”.

The nurse looked down and gave the handsome young man an indulgent smile. They were all the same. They needed a mother when they hurt and wanted a lover when they were feeling better. “You’re welcome. Now you’d better rest.” She walked to Kirby’s cot to check his dressing, then moved on down the line to watch over the others.

When Cajé looked up, he saw the medic shaking his head in disbelief. “Yer gettin` as bad as Kirby!”

The Cajun just shrugged his shoulders, a movement he soon regretted. He let his body relax and mold itself into the cot. It wasn’t long until he felt the welcome relief of the drug. He closed his eyes and let the spreading warmth pull apart all of his aches and pains until they completely disappeared. Just before he fell asleep, Cajé forced his eyes open and focused on the medic. “Has Sarge been here?” Before Doc could answer, the injured man drifted off.

“Hey, what’s with this guy anyway?” Oliver shouldered Kirby’s B.A.R. and waited for Nelson to respond. “He’s had a stick up-----.”

Before he could finish, Nelson jumped in. “You heard what happened. How would you like to make the decisions Sarge has to make every day? It ain’t easy ya know.” Billy remembered questioning Saunders’ actions himself but he had long come to the conclusion that the sergeant had no choice.

“Yeah, well he don’t have to take it out on the rest of us. Those two guys made it out, didn’t they?”

Littlejohn had heard Oliver's comments. He dropped back next to him. "Look, you're new here and you don't know the Sarge. Even if Cajé and Kirby are going to be ok, he had to make a decision that could have gotten them both killed."

None of them saw Saunders approaching. "Knock it off and spread out. Littlejohn, take the rear, Nelson, take point. Oliver, you keep your mind on your job and your mouth shut." The NCO lengthened his stride and moved out front.

First squad had been sent out to check on a bridge a couple of miles past L'Aigle. The whole company was getting ready to push forward and they needed to know if the structure could take heavy traffic. Saunders halted the squad just inside the tree line. He could see part of the bridge about one-hundred yards ahead.

Nelson returned and knelt beside Saunders. "It looks clear, Sarge but there's good cover on the other side of the bridge. There could be some stragglers in there."

"Ok, Littlejohn take Oliver and Reynolds and circle around to the left. I'll take Nelson with me on the right. Go to this side of the bridge but don't cross over. You got it?"

"Yeah, I got it, Sarge. Come on you two, let's go."

"Doc, stay put. Nelson take the radio." Saunders and Nelson circled wide to the right of the structure. There was open ground between them and the overpass.

"I'll go first." Saunders looked once more at the wooded area beyond the bridge. He crouched low and took off into the open space. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Littlejohn do the same.

The next man on both sides followed but before they could reach the bridge, the woods came alive with the sound of gunfire. Both Littlejohn and Saunders opened up trying to cover Oliver and Nelson.

Kirby's temporary replacement caught it and went down. He rolled on his side with a bloodied hand outstretched toward Saunders. They could hear him pleading for help amid the rapid exchange. Nelson managed to make it to the sergeant's position. They were pinned down with a wounded man caught in the open and only Reynolds and Doc left in the relative safety of the tree line.

Saunders looked at Oliver. Anyone who tried to get him out would be cut down before they could get near him. He could see Reynolds looking at the wounded man and knew he was trying to make up his mind whether he should try.

“Reynolds, stay put! You hear me, stay where you are!” Saunders’ orders were clear enough but Oliver’s tormented cries pulled at the young recruit.

“What now Sarge?” Nelson was looking toward the bridge’s left side. He knew Littlejohn was pinned down, the same way they were.

“Give me cover. I’m going to try and circle wide. See if there’s a place to cross. Radio the lieutenant.”

“But, Sarge...” Billy knew Saunders’ chances were slim.

“Do what I told you—now!” The sergeant picked what he thought was his best route and moved out, Thompson tucked close in, ready to use.

Nelson opened up, prompting Littlejohn to do the same on his side. Their fire was answered by both machine gun and rifles.

Saunders made it to the cover behind a crumbling stone wall but the Germans had seen him and he was pinned down once more. They were caught! They couldn’t retreat without being cut down in the open space between the bridge and the tree line and there was little cover if they tried to move forward. All the Krauts had to do was to wait. He yelled to Nelson. “Make every shot count. Tell Littlejohn and Reynolds the same.”

Doc had moved forward until he reached Reynolds’ position. He saw Oliver and as much as he wanted to help the wounded man, he knew he’d be committing suicide if he tried. “Where are they?”

Reynolds pointed out both Littlejohn and Nelson’s position. “The sergeant is further out, somewhere on the right. I can’t see him from here.” He stopped and gulped in a deep breath. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do? Sarge told me to stay here.”

Doc noticed the tremor in the young recruit’s voice. He placed a hand on the private’s arm. “If he told you to stay put than you do like he told you.”

The young soldier aimed and squeezed off a shot. The barrel of his rifle shook in time with his hands.

“Hang on, Reynolds.”

Hanley forded the river well downstream from the sporadic sounds of battle that surrounded the bridge. Somehow Saunders’ squad had walked into the middle of it. Nelson had radioed in their position; the patrol was in deep trouble and needed

help. He fanned his men out and started to close in on the German held side of the bridge. Well aimed grenades brought a swift death to the enemy who manned the machine gun. Those left split themselves between the two encroaching forces. It was a futile attempt that ended quickly.

Saunders stood up and moved forward when he saw Hanley walking across the bridge. Nelson had gotten through and lucky for them, help wasn't too far away.

"Glad we were close. Everybody ok?"

"Oliver went down when we started across." Saunders looked around to see where his men were. Nelson had joined Littlejohn. They both looked ok. He saw Reynolds standing looking down at the place where Oliver had fallen. He couldn't see the squad's medic.

"I told you to come and get me," Oliver grunted through the pain. The target for his anger was the green recruit, Reynolds.

"He couldn't get to you, none of us could." Doc continued to examine Oliver's bloody hip.

"Yeah, well none of you tried." The wounded man closed his eyes and rocked himself with the pain.

Hanley and Saunders joined the group as well as Nelson and Littlejohn. "Well, Doc?" the sergeant asked.

"Looks like his hip's busted. He needs to be evac'd. We can't do anything for him up here." The medic slid home the needle that would deliver at least some relief to the injured man.

Hanley ordered two of his men to make a litter. As they loaded the wounded private, Saunders stood back. Oliver held the sergeant's gaze for a moment, anger momentarily pushing away the pain on his face.

It seemed like forever since Cajé had been warm and clean and had as much food as he wanted. At first, his stomach rebelled. He wasn't used to eating regularly. But with time, he was able to handle more. Even Kirby was eating solid food now and making the most of hospital rations. Little by little, the lines of deprivation that marred their faces began to lessen.

"Hey Cajé, you hear anything about when we're getting kicked out of here?" Kirby shoveled in another mouthful of potatoes.

“No, nothing official but it shouldn’t be too much longer.” The PFC lit a cigarette.

“You sound as if you want to go back. Are you crazy or something?”

“I like being clean and not having to worry about freezing but I can’t help but think about the squad. I wonder how they’re doing without us?” Cajé took in a long drag.

“You think if they was here instead of us, they’d be wondering about how we were? You’re just plain crazy, Cajé, you know that?”

“Maybe.” The Cajun blow out a cloud of smoke. He smiled at Kirby. “But what would you do without me?”

“Ha, I’d have a better chance with some of these French girls if you wasn’t around.”

Cajé’s attention was drawn to some new commotion coming from the corner of the ward. He saw two doctors and several nurses working on a man that had just been wheeled in. When the crowd around the soldier dispersed, Cajé looked closer at the man. Something about him was familiar but he couldn’t quite place him.

“What’cha lookin` at?” Kirby followed Cajé’s line of sight.

“Nothing, just thought I knew that guy from somewhere.” Cajé still stared across the room.

“Well that ain’t unusual. We see other squads all the time. Maybe you ran into him on leave or something.” Kirby was quickly losing interest in Cajé’s puzzle. “Come on; let’s see if one of the nurses will let us take a little stroll. They said it was good for us to be up and walkin` around.”

Kirby was still gathering his strength so it didn’t take long before he was ready to get back to his bunk. As they passed the man who had just been brought in, Cajé took a closer look. It was one of the new replacements from 1st squad. If this guy was in here, than the others must have run into trouble.

“Hey, Oliver, isn’t it?” Cajé leaned close to the bed. He saw that the man’s left leg was supported by a metal frame attached to ropes and weights that hung off the bottom of the bed.

Oliver looked at the lean, dark- haired soldier and squinted his eyes. “Yeah, it’s me.” Recognition finally dawned. “Hey, you’re the two guys we brought out of that mess near L’Aigle.”

“That’s us alright,” Kirby answered. “What happened, you and the guys run into it?”

“Yeah, you could say that! The great Sergeant Saunders led us right into a Kraut machine gun nest.” He reached down and massaged his damaged thigh.

Kirby jumped in. “Look, that could happen to anybody. The Sarge ain’t magic, ya know.”

Trying to sooth Kirby’s rising anger, Caje replied, “He’s right. Anything can happen out there. You should know that.”

“All I know is that Saunders left me bleeding on the ground and wouldn’t help. And he wouldn’t let anybody else help either. What kind of a squad leader is that?”

“Sarge is the best squad leader there is,” Kirby answered. His face was turning red.

“Saunders would never leave a man down if there was a way to get to him.” Caje moved a step closer to Kirby.

“What’s wrong with you guys anyway, after what he did to you?” The anger stretched Oliver’s words into a harsh accusation that caught both men unaware.

“What do you mean, what Sarge did to us? He found us and brought us out, that’s what he did.” Kirby’s flashpoint had been reached.

The narrowing of Caje’s eyes and an almost imperceptible tightening of his jaw muscles were the only signs of the Cajun’s reaction to the wounded private’s inference. “What are you talking about?”

“You two think he came to rescue you?” Oliver laughed. “He only came in because Hanley told him to take the squad through that sector on the way to L’Aigle.” The hand that massaged his stricken leg moved faster.

“Well, it don’t matter. He found us, and we wouldn’t have made it without help.” Kirby took a moment to glance at Caje.

Caje saw the sudden surge of pleasure that crossed Oliver’s face. “He’s sure got you two fooled. Who do you think called in the artillery strike in the first place?” Oliver waited for his words to sink in.

Kirby launched himself toward the bed. “You’re a liar! Sarge would never do that.”

Cage grabbed the private just as he hit the side of Oliver's bed. Both of them let out a cry of pain. Before he could pull Kirby away, a doctor and two nurses came rushing to the bedside.

"What's going on in here? Are you men out of your minds?" The surgeon looked at Kirby struggling to get out of Caje's hold. "If you're so ready to fight, than you can go back on the line—both of you!"

Kirby pulled away and started for his own bunk. "He's lying, Caje." The private's anger was starting to cool as his pain increased.

"You need to calm down before you bust open your side. Here, sit down." Caje was about to check Kirby's dressing when a nurse appeared.

"I'll do that. You'd better sit down yourself." Deftly, she got both of her patients situated in bed and checked their injuries. She looked at Kirby and smiled. "No damage that I can see but I'll bet you're pretty sore at the moment."

Kirby had the good grace to duck his head and say, "Yes ma'am, a little."

"I'll get you something for the pain." She looked at Caje. "And you?"

"I'm fine." He tried to explain his friend's behavior. "Kirby just got excited about something Oliver said. It's over now."

She leaned in closer to the PFC's bed. "I don't know what this is all about but that guy has been trouble from the time he came in. I'm not saying he isn't hurt, he is. He's got a broken hip and he'll be going home as soon as it's safe to move him. But he's been yelling about some sergeant who he blames for his injury. He acts like he's the only guy who's been hurt in this war." She shook her head and left to get Kirby something for pain.

Guarding his left side, Kirby rolled to the right, turning his back to Caje. "I don't believe it. I don't care what nobody says."

Caje didn't answer. He couldn't. Kirby kept saying not Sarge; he kept thinking why not.

The jeep bounced over the rough roads back to headquarters. Good to his word, the surgeon had discharged both Kirby and Caje the next morning, declaring them both fit for duty. Kirby's constant staccato comments concerning Oliver's indictment of Saunders peppered the air but Caje relegated them to the background. His mind wandered to the question that had wedged itself into his

thoughts. Had Saunders really called in the artillery strike knowing there was little hope he and Kirby would make it out?

The PFC had been pressed into a squad leader role a few times in the past but only for brief periods. His decisions were based on his best judgment at the time—that's all he could do, that's all anyone could do. So why wasn't that explanation good enough for Saunders? Why should it be different for the Sarge? Cajé heaved a sigh. Maybe it wasn't but relegating two squad members to death? Where do the decisions of command collide with the decisions of the man? The tussle in his head made him weary.

The war had taught the Cajun a lot about himself that probably wouldn't have come to him until later. But war did that, it accelerated everything, some for the better but the worst could have waited until they were old and had lived a long life. He was a good point man: cautious, silent, vigilant. He could take the life of another human being and still function with a conscience that buried the deed deep enough so that he didn't have to deal with it in the present. He could take orders and he could give them when necessary but he hoped he would never be asked to take a permanent field commission. He knew he'd never wear the mantle of command easily.

Cajé's thoughts were interrupted by Kirby's insistence for an answer to a question he hadn't even heard. "Don't tell me you believe that jerk?"

"What?" Cajé's eyes refocused.

"Oliver—you don't believe that guy, do ya?" Kirby was exasperated by his friend's lack of attention.

"I don't know." Cajé's blunt answer took the other man by surprise and there was no immediate response. "Look, someone called in that strike. We were late to rendezvous with the others. Maybe Sarge had no choice. He couldn't let the Germans get into the forest."

"So he'd let two of his guys die? No Cage, you're wrong." Kirby turned his back and remained silent for the remainder of the trip.

The jeep did its best to stand on its front tires when the driver braked in front of the first shop in a row of bombed out structures. Cajé watched Kirby grab his side and heard him curse. "You tryin' to send us back to the hospital?"

The driver just smiled and said, "You got here, didn't ya?"

“Yeah, well no thanks to you.” Kirby grumbled and grabbed his pack. He turned his attention to a group of soldiers who stood nearby. “Can you guys tell me where the HQ is?”

“Yer in front of it, buddy.” One of the men jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

The two returning men dropped their gear amid the rubble near the entrance and walked in. The lieutenant stood beside two crates that had been stacked to make a temporary desk. A map was spread on top of the rickety structure. Next to Hanley stood Saunders. Both raised their heads at the same time.

A grin split the officer’s face. “Well, it’s about time you two got back. What happened, some nurse get tired of you chasing her around, Kirby?”

“Naah, I mean, no Sir, they told us we was fit to return to duty.”

“He’s right, Sir,” Cajé added. “The doctor released us this morning.”

Saunders had remained silent until now. Cajé noticed the smile on the NCO’s face when he first saw them but it quickly disappeared. “Glad you’re back,” he said. “You’d better join the others. You’ll find them bivouacked in an old feed mill near the river. We’ll be moving out in the morning.”

Kirby was about to say something when Hanley spoke up. “You’re dismissed men. You’d better get something to eat and rest while you can.” He paused for a moment. “And welcome back.”

The two men left and Hanley and Saunders were once again alone. “They’re not stupid, Saunders. You think they don’t know something has changed? Your whole squad knows.”

Saunders drew himself up and once again took on the air of formality. “Do you have some complaint about the way I’ve conducted my missions, Sir?”

“No Saunders, no complaints. Have your men ready by 0600.”

Cajé waited for Kirby to say something. He knew it wouldn’t be long. The man’s patience was always razor thin and his anger at Oliver’s accusations only made it worse.

“Don’t say nothing, Cajé. Just `cause he didn’t jump up and down don’t mean he wasn’t glad to see us.”

The scout's deep set eyes were unreadable as he maintained his silence. He knew the only man who could tell Kirby what he needed to know was the Sarge.

They walked on until they saw the remnants of what had once been a grist mill. The huge wheel had been knocked off its gears and lay partially submerged in the swiftly flowing water. Part of the roof was gone showing the works that had ground the grain from surrounding farms. Mourning doves roosted in the remaining rafters.

"Hey, hey look, it's Cajé and Kirby!" Billy jumped up and ran to the approaching soldiers.

He grabbed Kirby's hand and shook it until the private complained. "Easy there kid. I'm still kinda fragile."

"Yeah, Kirby, that's you alright—fragile." Littlejohn couldn't let the comment go by.

"Ahh, shut up ya big moose. Who'd ya pick on when I wasn't here?"

"Hey Cajé, we're sure glad to have you back," Billy said. "Sarge made me take point a couple of times." He suddenly lost his smile. "I didn't like it out there."

The Cajun smiled at him. "I'm sure you did just fine."

Doc had joined the group. "Glad to see you two. Are you sure you're ready to be back? Seems kinda early." The medic's eyes scrutinized both men, looking for any signs discomfort.

"Naah, we're so good, the head surgeon himself let us go early." Kirby looked over at Cajé waiting to see his reaction.

The PFC raised an eyebrow. "Yes, he did say something about us being ready to fight," Cajé replied.

Doc saw the unspoken words exchanged between the two men but decided not to press the issue. "Alright but let me know if there's a problem."

"Hey, we saw that jerk Oliver back at the hospital. You guys run into it?" Kirby was quick to change the subject.

"Did we ever," Billy answered. "We went to check out a bridge. See if it could take armored traffic and the Krauts were waitin` on the other side."

Both Cajé and Kirby looked up when Reynolds joined the group. "Oliver went down quick but nobody could get to him," Billy continued.

A quiet, reticent voice joined the conversation. "I wanted to go to him but Sarge told me to stay put."

"And the Sarge was right," Doc said. "You would have been cut down before you got ten feet."

"Well, to hear him tell it, the Sarge left him out there on purpose." Kirby's anger began to rise again.

"That's not true," Littlejohn chimed in. "We got to him as soon as we could."

"I know, that guy wouldn't know the truth if it hit him over the head. Hey, you wanna hear something funny? Oliver told us that it was the Sarge who called in that artillery strike that Cajé and I got caught in." Kirby stopped for a moment then added. "Can you believe that?"

Suddenly, the raucous homecoming ceased and the only sound was the gentle cooing of the doves. The air became charged with an unspoken tension as each man looked away. Doc was the only one who held Kirby's eye.

"Well, what's wrong with you guys? Didn't ya hear what I said?" Kirby felt a sudden chill run through him as he looked from man to man. He waited for someone to tell him Oliver was wrong; that Saunders would never do that.

Cajé reached out and placed a hand on his friend's arm. "Kirby..."

A violent shrug pulled the hand away. "No, where's the Sarge? He'll tell you guys."

"I'm right here." Every head turned toward the doorway.

"Tell'em Sarge, tell'em you wouldn't do that." Kirby's anger was layered with a thin film of doubt.

"Cajé, Kirby—outside." Saunders turned and disappeared through the doorway. The two men followed him.

Although Cajé knew what Saunders was about to say, he found himself bracing for the impact of the words.

Saunders pivoted around to face the two soldiers. "I was the one who called in the artillery strike. We spotted the enemy moving into the woods and they had to be stopped."

Kirby stood motionless and silent as he let the words sink in. "You knew we were in there. You knew we'd probably be killed and you called in a barrage?" The fight seemed to have left him. "I wouldn'ta thought it of you, Sarge—not you," he said, almost in a whisper.

All of the frustration and anger spilled out in Saunders. "Well, you'd be wrong. I'm a sergeant in the United States Army and my job is to follow orders. I'm not here to be your mother or anybody else's. The decision needed to be made and I made it." He stopped long enough to look at Cajé. "If you can't do your job in this squad anymore, than ask for a transfer. Both of you. But in the meantime, you'll do as you're told. You got that?"

Kirby stood stiff-limbed with hands balled into fists. Defiance burned bright in the deep brown eyes. "Yes, Sergeant, I got it."

Cajé acknowledged Saunders' question with a brief nod but said nothing. He watched the sergeant walk back toward the mill while Kirby disappeared into the willows that lined the river.

The sun had already set when Kirby walked into the shelter. The squad gathered close to the small fire that had been set within the hollow of one of the grinding stones. They spoke in soft, hushed tones but stopped when he approached them.

"You ain't gotta stop talkin` cause of me." He halted just outside the circle of men, looking at each one in turn. "Guess you had a big laugh, huh? Dumb, old Kirby didn't believe the Sarge could do it"

"Nobody laughed, Kirby," Doc replied.

"Yeah, sure," he said and moved off into the corner. For reasons Kirby couldn't explain to himself, he suddenly felt defeated. The anger was gone but he was having trouble figuring out what was taking its place. Oh, hell, he thought, it don't matter anyway. Just another part of this lousy war he'd volunteered for. He pulled out his bedroll and lay down. With his hands locked behind his head, he stared up through the broken rafters into the night sky. He let his mind wander aimlessly from thoughts of home to he and Cajé trying to survive than back to the sergeant's decision. Let down, that was it, he felt that Saunders had let him and Cajé down. The mission had become more important than their lives. How does a guy do that; how does he let his own men die? He closed his eyes, waiting for sleep to make it all go away.

Rain once again threatened as the dawn lightened the sky from black to slate gray. The faint glow from the end of Saunders' cigarette punched a small hole in

the early morning gloom. Had it not been for that, Doc would have missed the silent NCO.

“You’re up pretty early, Sarge.”

“Yeah, I am. Is there something you wanted, Doc?” Saunders wasn’t about to reveal that he hadn’t slept. Kirby’s anger and Cajé’s—Cajé’s what? He could understand the anger but Cajé just looked at him with an expression that didn’t divulge anything and eyes that were fathomless.

“No, just thought maybe you could use somebody to talk to after last night.” The words were delivered in the gentle cadence of his Southern roots.

Saunders stiffened. “There’s nothing to talk about. Cage and Kirby are aware of what happened and it’s their decision to stay or transfer. It’s as simple as that.”

“The three of you have been through a lot together, Sarge. It would be too bad to have it end this way.”

“I’ll tell you the same thing I told them---I’m not their mother; I’m not their friend.” Saunders took a long pull from his cigarette. “Just drop it, Doc.”

“I don’t think either of them is looking for a mother but it may be too late to convince them that you’re not their friend.” The medic turned and disappeared back into the mill.

Saunders watched as the light tried to push its way up over the horizon. He crushed the last of his cigarette under the heel of his boot than rubbed his tired eyes. Hanley would be up soon and the briefing for today’s mission would follow. He was glad for that.

Their orders were clear. Scout the sector marked off on the map and radio back any enemy activity. Saunders entered the mill and found the men doing what they always did when they knew they were going out; checking ammunition, cleaning their rifles and in Doc’s case, making sure he had all the supplies he could pack into his bag. The difference was the silence. No wise cracks, no quick retorts, the easy camaraderie was replaced by an uneasy silence.

“Saddle up.” Saunders walked to the corner where Cajé stood, waiting. He pulled the map from inside his jacket and shared the sector coordinates and the mission with his scout. “Ok, move out—Cajé, point, Kirby, rear.”

The mapped off sector covered mostly open terrain with an occasional deep hole. Not the kind created by nature but a wide, yawning hole created by exploding bombs when they tore into the undisturbed earth.

No warning came before the sound of machine gun fire splintered the silence. The men scattered before the onrush of bullets. Caught out front, Cajé dove into the nearest crater and pulled his helmet tight with both hands. His M1 lay close beside him.

Littlejohn, Billy and Doc managed to make it into another depression while Saunders and Kirby occupied the hole in between. Saunders shouted to the men behind him. Doc replied, "We're ok here, Sarge."

"Cajé—Cajé?" The sergeant and Kirby looked at each other, the same expression of worry painted both their faces.

It seemed forever before the Cajun answered. "I'm alright. I'm pinned down. I can't get a shot off."

Saunders yelled back. "Stay put and stay down."

"Littlejohn, try to get through to Hanley. Tell him we're under heavy fire."

A line of bullets strafed the rim near Cajé's head. He borrowed deeper into the bottom of the hole pulling his gun down with him. There was no way he could return fire without setting himself up as a target.

"We gotta do something, Sarge. Cajé doesn't stand a chance out there." Kirby's voice rang with a mixture of desperation and anger. "I'm not leavin' him out there to die!"

"You go running out there and you'll get yourself killed and maybe Cajé too. Use your head! The squad needs your B.A.R. for cover." Saunders stopped then added, "It's not about Cajé, it's not about you; it's about the squad. You understand that Kirby? It's about more than one or two men."

Kirby didn't answer but he picked up the rifle and got ready to fire.

"Cover me. I'm going back to Nelson and Littlejohn. When I tell you, open up. I'll try to distract them while the others flank right and left." Kirby nodded. "Now!"

The private popped up and sprayed the enemy position with gun fire. Littlejohn and Nelson added to the barrage. Zig zagging as he ran, Saunders made it back. Breathing hard, he shouted orders over the sound of Kirby's gun. Nelson and Littlejohn crawled out of their shallow cover.

“You stay here, Doc,” Saunders said.

“What are you gonna do, Sarge?”

“I’m going to try and divert their attention while Nelson and Littlejohn get into place.”

“That’s a good way to get yourself killed.”

“You got a better idea, Doc?” Without waiting for an answer, he pushed himself up and over the edge of the crater. Saunders ran the same pattern in reverse. He could feel the puffs of air blow by him as the missiles passed. Dirt and dust were kicked up into the air. In a final desperate attempt, he leapt into the hole that held Kirby. Gun fire continued to roar around them.

“Littlejohn and Nelson are flanking both sides. Keep firing!” The sound of Saunders’ Thompson was added to the bark of the B.A.R. A sudden explosion made them both duck down as far as they could. The air was so thick with dust, it was hard to breath. Rifle fire took the place of the momentary silence following the grenade burst. Both men scrambled up to the rim of the crater and looked over. Fire was still coming from the Kraut position. “Move up,” Saunders yelled above the roar.

Both men bent low and scrambled forward. Seeing their movement, the enemy redirected their fire at the new targets. Kirby went over the edge first landing on his newly healed side. He couldn’t hold back a grunt of pain. Saunders came to rest at Cajé’s feet. He wiped the sweat and grime out of his eyes.

A second and third explosion sounded, spewing a newly formed cloud of smoke and dirt into the already clogged air. Silence suddenly surrounded them. A gust of wind began to push away the haze and smell of battle. Saunders was the first on his feet. He saw Littlejohn and Nelson waving all clear signals. His eyes scanned his immediate surroundings. Relief ran through him when he saw both Cajé and Kirby struggling to rise.

Saunders pulled himself up and over the side. By then, Cajé was on his feet. They held each others gaze for a moment before the sergeant said, “Can you make it?”

“I’ll make it, Sarge.” A smile crept across the scout’s face. Cajé put out his hand and let Saunders help him out. Both men moved toward Kirby.

The private lay on his back, fists pushing into his wounded side. He started to get up but only managed to struggle to his knees. He looked up and saw Saunders and Cajé standing on the rim of the crater, each with a hand extended toward him. He reached out and let the two men pull him to his feet. Cajé took Kirby’s

arm and hiked it over his shoulder, moving in closer. Saunders reached to do the same and stopped.

A crooked grin split the private's face. "Can we go home now, Sarge?"

"Yeah, we can go home now." Saunders drew Kirby's other arm over his shoulder and the three men moved off together.

The End