

Sleep in Heavenly Peace

By EPM

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A chorus of snores and sighs bounced off the walls of the barn and echoed softly into the windless December night. Saunders stood as a silent sentinel, alert to anything that might cause harm to those he guarded.

As much as he tried to push away any thoughts that might cause his attention to wander, this time of the year broke through the hardest resolve and invaded the quiet moments. Recollections of Christmases at home left him with feelings of emptiness and loss. He shook it off and looked down at the individuals scattered around the barn floor.

He smiled as Littlejohn's snoring bass notes seemed to rattle the very foundation. If the other men hadn't been so tired, he doubted that any of them would have been sleeping. Steady and steady to the others in the squad, Littlejohn provided a kind of quiet reassurance, especially to the new men.

Saunders looked at the next man and wasn't surprised to find Nelson curled up not too far from Littlejohn's side. Billy added the freshness and enthusiasm of youth that had been stripped from the rest of them.

Doc lay in the center, the lines of exhaustion eased from a face made old before its time. The sergeant lit a cigarette and started out the window. The medic seemed to be the squad's moral compass. Saunders had to admit that there were times he could do without questions that had two answers. His job was to complete the mission and complications could get somebody killed. But the men could talk to Doc about anything and just knowing that helped them step through the hell that surrounded them.

Restless, sporadic movements defined the next man in line. Kirby shifted from side to side, unable to find a comfortable spot. But that seemed to be Kirby, awake or asleep. Uncomfortable with the food, the locals, the weather, the brass --- anything to complain about. Funny how all that disappeared as soon as he was needed.

The last man lay in the corner, a little apart from the others. Propped up in a semi-sitting position, even in sleep Caje appeared to be ready for anything. His heritage and language made him stand out from the others but never divided him from them. Quiet and efficient, the scout could be counted on for any task his sergeant asked. The toll would come later.

Saunders shifted his position and looked out into the night sky. A gentle wind had come up, blowing huge snowflakes across the face of the moon. After the war, most of them would slip back into the lives they had left. But for now, it was these men he chose to be with. The feelings of emptiness began to fade.

Christmas, 2008