

Friendly Fire

By EPM

Pace_setter68@yahoo.com



This is my first Combat story. I would like to thank two individuals for their encouragement and for taking the time to read my story: Miss Maquis and Thompson Girl. The characters are not mine but I appreciate being able to borrow them for a little while. < > denotes language being spoken in French.

Caje hated these kinds of early morning recons. The fog seemed to rise up out of the ground, shrouding everything in its thick, cloying mist. The dampness penetrated each layer of his uniform, leaving him chilled and uncomfortable. For all that, he was glad to be out front. They had picked up two new replacements, Crocker and Stevens. It was left to Saunders and the rest to turn them into a functioning part of the squad and hopefully keep them alive. He shook the dripping mist from his dark head. What he wouldn't give for a cup of hot coffee, even if was GI issued.

Hanley had sent them out early to make sure a farmhouse taken from the Germans two days before, was still unoccupied. They wanted to move up the CP and the little house seemed ideal. The Sarge had told them the night before that they'd better get some early sack time. He remembered Kirby saying something about early to bed and earlier to rise. He smiled thinking of his friend. Kirby had a knack for frequently sticking his foot in his mouth but Caje couldn't ask for a better man at his side during a fight.

Resuming his usual crouched posture, the Cajun's steps were silent as he moved forward into the small wooded area that backed up to their objective. He couldn't see the rest of the squad but he could hear the occasional snapping of a twig or the splash of a boot as it sloshed through shallow puddles and he knew they were behind him.

It was Spring but you'd never be able to tell that by the blackened and battered skeletons that were once the little wood. The outline of the cottage appeared out of the fog. Just as he was about to move forward again, the sound of gunshots and an explosion of pain reached him at the same time. He dropped behind the corpse of a rotting tree, silent and unmoving and unaware of the gunfire that erupted around him.

***** ***** *****

Replacements-- a green kid and a disgruntled veteran who'd seen too much and buried himself behind a bitter shell. Saunders shook his head and ran a hand into the thick, tawny mane that never quite seemed to know its place. He gave in to a momentary lapse and let himself wonder why him, why First Squad. But he knew better than to question; that wasn't his job. His job was to obey orders and to make them into the best fighting men he could.

Crocker was young with no experience at all. Saunders knew all these kids were at their most vulnerable during the first firefight. He never knew how any of them would react--hell, they didn't know themselves. He seemed like a nice kid, kinda quiet and shy and it wasn't surprising that he and Nelson seemed to buddy up right away.

Stevens chose to be an outsider from the very beginning. Hanley had brought the men to the barn where Saunders' squad was bivouacked and introduced them to the Sergeant. He, in turn, rattled off the names of his men: Caje, Kirby, Littlejohn, Nelson and Doc. Each man acknowledged the newcomers with a smile and a hello. Stevens' only response had been to ask where he could stow his gear. Kirby looked at Caje and raised a questioning eyebrow. Caje shrugged his shoulders and went back to cleaning his rifle.

Littlejohn figured maybe the new guy was just tired and didn't really mean to come across as he had. He got up and walked over to the corner where Stevens now sat. "Hi, in case you don't remember, they call me Littlejohn." He reached out his hand in greeting. Stevens looked up at the man towering above him. He stared at Littlejohn for a moment then turned his face toward the wall and closed his eyes.

Kirby looked at Caje and said, "I guess that answers my question."

Saunders had witnessed the entire exchange. He turned on his heel and walked outside. The sun was beginning to lower itself below the horizon and the familiar scents of spring floated in on a brisk breeze. He saw Hanley leaning against an abandoned hay rake, enjoying a moment of quiet while he smoked. Saunders approached the Lieutenant.

'You're wondering about Stevens.'

The Sergeant didn't reply.

Hanley let the smoke that had been deep in his lungs a moment before, slowly escape. "Seasoned veteran of the Italian campaign. Just got transferred out of his last unit at his own request. Now he's yours." He gave Saunders a moment. "Anything else?"

"He doesn't seem too friendly, does he?" Saunders lit a cigarette of his own.

"No rule says he has to be." Hanley threw what remained of his cigarette onto the ground.

"Nope, but you and I both know a squad functions better when the men get along," Saunders answered.

"Well Sergeant, I'm sure you'll have him in shape in no time." Hanley smiled and returned to his jeep.

They had moved out early, just as the Sergeant had promised they would. Saunders motioned for Cajé to take the point. The little band followed with Kirby watching the rear. Early morning mists still shrouded the area.

Saunders saw a shadowed movement dart between trees just ahead of them. He motioned for the next man to drop and they in turn signaled the others until Kirby received the last sign. The men crawled forward until they were grouped behind their Sergeant.

There was no further movement. Saunders turned to scan the soldiers. Crocker's eyes were wide with fear. Sweat ran down his face in spite of the cool temperature. The young man's fingers were bloodless as he clutched his M1.

In contrast, Steven's face held no expression at all; his mouth set in a grim line. There was no indication fear or any other emotion.

Again the shadow moved, seeming to jockey for position between jagged boulders that erupted up out of the earth and the remnants of old growth trees. Before Saunders could say anything, Stevens opened up. Crocker followed the older man's lead. Saunders was furious but before he could say anything, an answering volley of gunfire spread out in front of them. Flashes could be seen from the barrels of the German rifles. They had to move before they were trapped.

Saunders motioned for Kirby to take Crocker and move to the right while Littlejohn took Stevens to the left. He and Nelson would move forward. "Be sure of your target before you fire," the Sergeant warned. "I don't want any mistakes in this soup."

Doc hung back, watching the men move out of sight.

Kirby could see the tangible fear in the young recruit. The end of Crocker's gun trembled in time with his hands. He gave the boy a brief smile and motioned for him to follow. They dodged between the fallen trees, being careful to make as little noise as possible. He signaled for Crocker to halt behind him as they both took cover.

Saunders saw the flash of black against gray directly in front of them. Nelson must have seen it at the same time. Both men fell behind a group of boulders and opened up. The shadows began to fall under the onslaught.

Stevens followed Littlejohn as he circled around toward the occupied house. Several Germans ran from the back of the building and into the woods. The Americans fired into the moving enemy. Littlejohn saw Kirby closing in on his side. With the Sarge and Nelson in front and the others closing from behind to the right and left, the Germans were surrounded.

The squad moved slowly forward, tightening the net around the enemy within. A grenade thrown at the remaining three or four soldiers dug in behind a low thicket of briars, ended the melee. Doc moved forward as they joined ranks.

"Spread out and make sure they're all dead," Saunders ordered. "Littlejohn, Crocker-- search their pockets. Kirby, you and Stevens make sure the house is clear."

Kirby hesitated. "Sarge--?"

Saunders understood the question in Kirby's voice but he needed the men to focus.

"Do what I told you," Saunders snapped. "Take Nelson with you." The Sergeant's eyes scanned the area.

Doc's quiet voice broke into his thoughts. "Caje?"

Blue eyes met his own and Saunders hesitated before he answered, his voice mimicking Doc's. "Yeah Doc, he can't be far." Both men knew the Cajun would have reported in before now if he'd been able but neither wanted to voice the alternative. They began to search.

The fog was almost gone now leaving only wispy little clouds. The sun broke through; a sharp contrast to the death and destruction that lay beneath the warming rays. Saunders caught sight of a piece of black material sticking up over the edge of a huge log. As he came closer, he could see that it was the corner of Caje's beret. A jagged splinter had snagged it from the soldier's jacket.

Saunders scrambled over the barrier. Caje lay on his back, his rifle tucked in close. Had it not been for the deathly pallor that painted his face, the scout would have looked as if he were sleeping.

Doc pulled Caje's jacket apart and unbuttoned his shirt. Unable to find any obvious signs of injury, he searched the man's arms and legs. Gently, he palpated the private's head; fingers searching beneath the thick, black hair. "I can't find anything Sarge." After feeling a weak pulse that raced against his fingers, Doc knew he had missed something. "Help me turn him over." The two men turned their fallen comrade onto his stomach. "Be careful."

There it was. A deep red stain spread across the lower half of Caje's field jacket. Doc pushed it out of the way and pulled the injured man's shirt and undershirt free from his pants. A soft, involuntary groan was torn from Saunders as he saw the small hole perilously close to the Cajun's spine.

Doc tore open a packet of sulfa and sprinkled it liberally over the wound. "We've got to be careful Sarge. I have no idea where that bullet is or how much damage it's done." He pulled out a thick dressing from his pack. "I need you to hold him steady will I tie this around him."

Saunders held Caje in position while Doc tied the dressing in place. A sharp intake of breath followed by a soft cry told the men that Caje was waking up. Doc fell to the ground so that he was at eye level with the injured man. "Hang on now Caje. You've got a bullet in your back and I don't want you movin' around. I'll give you something for the pain in a minute."

Caje knew that the low, unintelligible sounds he heard were voices but whose and what they were saying was something his mind couldn't grasp. He felt the cool mud and the prick of sharp pine needles under his cheek and smelled the residue of gunpowder in the air. Without warning, a sharp pain hit him low in his back and traveled down into his legs, leaving them trembling. He heard his own cry added to the voices around him.

Doc's face swam into view as Caje's eyes tried to adjust to the sunlight. His mind was clear enough now to know he'd been hit. Fear fought with the pain as he asked, "How bad?"

"Take it easy. You've been hit but we're gonna get you back." Doc placed a hand on the scout's shoulder.

"Sarge--" It took all the effort Caje could muster to ask for his squad leader.

Doc moved out of the way and let Saunders take his place. The sergeant had seen men injured in all the horrendous ways a war could inflict upon the human body. He had held their hands and tried to comfort them as they finally slipped away; screaming in agony or crying softly for release. But something twisted inside him as he watched the man he had come to trust and rely on, struggle against the pain and fear that washed over him. "I'm right here, Caje. As soon as we clear the building, we'll get you inside." His hand sought the Cajun's. Fingers twisted together, bonding the two men to the moment.

They heard a voice behind them mutter softly, "Oh God, not Caje." If someone had asked Kirby later what he had said, he could honestly tell them he had no idea that he had spoken. It had been a visceral response from his gut. He'd seen enough men fall in this brutal hell to know nobody was invincible. But it had somehow seemed that way with Caje. Oh sure, he'd been hit before but nothing slowed him down for long. Before you knew it, he'd pop right back up, taking his place out front. Out front where he belonged; not lying in the cold mud with a bullet in his back. "Caje----."



Saunders got to his feet and saw his men gathered around the downed scout. He needed to get their attention back. He stepped between Kirby and the injured man. "We have no idea how far the Krauts have advanced or whether this little fracas has alerted them. We'll get Caje inside and I'll scout around to see if it's clear. You ready Doc?"

"Yeah, now listen you guys. I've just given him some morphine. I have no idea where that bullet is so we've got to give him an easy ride."

Littlejohn spoke up. "We'll be careful, Doc. Just tell us what to do."

Gently and under Doc's direction, the Cajun was transported into the empty farmhouse. Unlike most of the buildings that had been caught as innocent victims of the war, this house looked as if someone had just stepped away for the day. The roof, as well as the walls, was intact and the interior spoke of someone's loving care.

Caje did not move when they placed him face down on the one bed that claimed its own room. Doc had seen no movement at all from him since he had administered the morphine. Part of him was glad that Caje was beyond pain, at least for now but the bigger concern for the medic was whether the injured man could move still move his legs. Doc took a deep breath to gather himself than pulled a chair up to the bedside. He sat down hard, exhausted by the events of the day. Scrubbing his hands across his eyes, he wondered how many times he had maintained this same vigil; how many men, how many more.

Sarge had given orders to the squad making it clear that while he looked around, Kirby was in charge. He stepped across the threshold of the bedroom but stopped when he saw Doc's slumped shoulders and worried face. With one last glance at the sleeping man, he quietly backed out of the room.

Saunders walked up to Kirby. "Keep them alert. I've got a feeling we aren't alone out here."

"Right Sarge--and Sarge, be careful," Kirby answered.

The shadows of afternoon began to lengthen and spill across the scrubbed hardwood floors. Littlejohn and Billy had taken the two windows that faced the front while Stevens and Crocker watched from the right. Kirby stood at the remaining opening on the left but frequently walked between that and the open bedroom. He looked in, hoping for some kind of response from Doc then retraced his steps back to his post.

"But--but how do you know that? You couldn't know!" Crocker's distraught voice echoed throughout the otherwise silent room.

"I ain't sayin' it happened, kid. I'm sayin', it could have, that's all. And it wouldn't be the first time somebody got hit by their own fire." Stevens jerked his head toward the bedroom.

"That guy may have just been in the way." He looked away from Crocker, glancing back out the window. "Everybody's luck runs out sooner or later."

The whole squad's attention was now on the new replacements. Crocker's face had paled and his expression was one of confusion overlaid with shock. His pleading eyes met Nelson's. "Billy?" But Billy couldn't answer. His head swiveled back and forth between Crocker and Stevens. His mouth hung open, forming a small "O" in disbelief.

Littlejohn spoke up; anger edging his voice. "What are you tellin' the kid, Stevens?"

"Look, all I said is that your scout in there could have been hit by either Crocker or me when we opened up. It ain't nothing new and you guys know it." Stevens snorted out a short, bitter laugh. "The fortunes of war they call it."

Kirby stepped away from his window and stood in front of Stevens. "The fortunes of war----?" His face twisted as his anger overwhelmed him. "You're sayin' you could have shot Cajé in the back and it's no big deal?"

Doc heard the escalating voices. He reached out to check Cajé's bandages once more. Finding no new bleeding, he walked into the other room. "Are you guys nuts or something? I'm trying to keep Cajé quiet and you're supposed to be watchin' for Krauts."

It was Littlejohn's voice that answered. He'd caught a glimpse of Saunders coming in. "It's the Sarge."

Saunders ducked in the front door. He immediately saw Kirby toe to toe with Stevens. His hands were balled into fists and his face was flushed a high red.

"Alright, what's going on," Saunders asked. He walked up to the two men. "Kirby?"

"Why don't you ask him, Sarge?" Kirby answered. His voice was tight with a barely restrained fury.

"Because I'm askin' you," the noncom snapped. "What is it?"

Kirby looked away from Stevens and faced his angry Sergeant. "Stevens here decided to tell Crocker that it might have been one of them that shot Cajé when they opened up." He looked back. "He said it happens all the time."

Saunders' eyes hardened as he stared at the new man. There was no mistaking the ice that formed on each word. "Now you listen to me, Stevens. Nobody needs to hear that. Do you think it makes any difference to Cajé if it's an American bullet or a German bullet in his back?"

He turned to face the rest of the squad. "There's a Kraut patrol about a half a mile from here. Now get back to your posts and knock it off." He looked back at the two combatants. "Everybody!"

The men moved back into position. Crocker looked dazed and frightened. Saunders reminded himself to speak to the kid later. But for now, he needed to see Cajé.

Saunders was sure that Doc had closed the door to protect his patient against the confrontation in the other room. So he wasn't surprised when he was met with a look of reprimand as he entered. The medic's face relaxed when he saw who it was.

"You straighten them out, Sarge?"

"Yeah Doc, for now anyway. How's Cajé?" Saunders moved closer to the bed.

"The morphine's beginning to wear off. He should be coming around soon." Doc hovered closer, watching as the injured man began to stir.

Saunders jerked his head, asking Doc to join him on the other side of the room. "Look Doc, the Krauts aren't far behind me. And the first thing they'll do is check out this house. What's the chance of being able to move Cajé if we have to?"

"None, if you're worried about where that bullet is," Doc answered.

"We may have to make a run for it. And we can't leave him here." Saunders' eyes darted back to the bed. "The Germans won't take a wounded prisoner."

"I'm sorry, Sarge. You're in a tough spot." Doc knew that Saunders would make whatever decisions he had to protect his men but he also knew the guilt that would eat at the man if Cajé were to die or lose the use of his legs.

A quick intake of breath followed by an elongated groan brought both men back to the bedside. Hazel eyes dulled by the relentless pain, looked out from Cajé's gaunt face. "Leave me, Sarge. Get the squad out of here."

"Nobody's leavin' anybody anywhere. You just rest," Saunders said. He sat down in the chair.

Cajé's voice rose, tinged with panic. His fingers dug into the mattress. "Listen Sarge, I'd rather be dead than not be able to walk. Please--please promise you'll leave me." Cajé collapsed back into the soft coverings.

The muted plea repeated.

The tired Sergeant took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He and Cajé had hit the beach together. There was something about that experience that forged a connection among the men who had survived. He and Cajé had somehow made it. A Louisiana Cajun whose French accent was so thick that sometimes Saunders and the others in the unit had to listen carefully. How had that guy and a guy from the Midwest ever come together? Under ordinary circumstances, he wondered if he and Cajé would have ever made that same connection. He pushed his fists into his tired eyes. It didn't matter really; these weren't ordinary circumstances.

"Sarge---Sarge, they're coming." Kirby's strident whisper drew the noncom away from his thoughts.

Saunders leapt to his feet. "Take care of him, Doc," he called over his shoulder as he raced from the room.

He approached Kirby's position and carefully searched the landscape. The late afternoon light was fading into a dull grey. "There Sarge, off to the left," Kirby said.

Saunders saw the movement of men carefully dodging between trees and the cover of jumbled boulders. He knew they must have seen the remains of the German squad that they had killed this morning. What the approaching patrol didn't know was whether the Americans had left the area or not.

"Alright everyone, keep your heads down and don't open up until I tell you." The sergeant stared at Stevens as he gave the order then he moved to Crocker's side.

"You doin' ok, Crocker?" he asked.

"Yes Sergeant, I'm ok." The young recruit's voice shook and his hand trembled on the stock of his gun. He hesitated for a moment. "Sarge, do you think it's true what Stevens said--- that it could have been one of us who shot Cajé?"

"Look kid, we probably won't ever know. Right now you can help Cajé the most by staying alert and doing your job." Saunders gave the young man a brief smile.

The NCO moved out front next to Littlejohn and Billy. "They're coming up on Kirby's side. Nelson, go out the back and see if you can get into position with a grenade."

"Ok Sarge," Billy replied. He hesitated for a moment. "Ahh Sarge, how's Cajé doin'?"

"He's the same. Now go do what I told you and maybe we can get him out of here." There was no heat in Saunders' words. He followed the young private to the back door. "I'll cover you."

Nelson sprinted toward a low stone wall. It provided cover and afforded him a good view of anything coming up on the left side. He waited.



Saunders returned to the other side of Kirby's window. Both men stared at the advancing troops. Suddenly two branched off toward the front of the house. As they moved forward, the Sergeant yelled "Now!" The sound of his Thompson punctuated the order.

The surprised Germans fell like dominos under the onslaught of the American barrage. Littlejohn dispatched two soldiers that were making their way into the front yard.

"Crocker, take the front with Littlejohn. Stevens, keep alert on that side." Saunders moved to the back door. He caught a glimpse of Billy crouched low behind the wall.

The remaining enemy troops had taken cover behind fallen logs and the granite outcroppings. Kirby's B.A.R. kept up a steady rhythm over the lighter sounds of the M1s and the Sergeant's Thompson.

The untouched farmhouse suddenly became another causality of the war. Glass from the windows was shattered along with the splintered frames. Bullet holes let in the fading late afternoon light. Like the soldiers it sheltered, the house would bear scars that would lessen with time but never fade away.

***** ***** *****

Doc sat closer to Cajé as the injured man became restless. "Tell me what's happening Doc?" His voice thick with pain and the frustration of not being able to help his squad.

"You gotta lie still. You can't do anything to help and you're only hurting yourself." The medic put a restraining hand on the man's shoulder.

"You should have made a run for it," Cajé answered. "The Sarge was wrong. You---you should have left me." His strength exhausted, Cajé stopped struggling.

Doc didn't have any more words. He knew that no matter what he said, he would never convince Cajé that being alive and crippled was better than being dead.

***** ***** *****

"Kirby, you're on me. We'll go out the back and flank them on the right. Maybe it'll get their attention and give Nelson enough time to toss a grenade into the middle of them." The sergeant turned to Littlejohn. "You take over Kirby's window. Crocker, you're up front. Stevens stay where you are and keep alert."

Saunders and Kirby were able to slip into the wooded cover to the right. They crouched low and circled wide, hoping to remain unseen until they could get close enough to do some damage.

The Germans continued to batter the farmhouse with continuous gunfire. They tried again to send two men around toward the front. Crocker saw them and opened up. One man fell instantly while the other dove behind the base of a stone well. Trying to get into a better position to see, the young private crossed in front of the window. It only took that instant for the remaining enemy soldier to cut the young man down.

Crocker dropped his gun and grabbed at his chest, a look of surprise frozen on his young face. He slowly slid down the wall until he was sitting on the floor. Blood ran over his hands, soaking into his field jacket.

Littlejohn yelled above the noise for Doc. The medic had done his best to comfort the agitated scout but he knew from Littlejohn's voice that someone else needed him now. He ran from the room, instantly seeing the cause of Littlejohn's distress. Kneeling close, he pulled the young man's hands away from his chest. Doc could see the boy's eyes were wide with fright. "Easy son, let me help you."

"Tell him," Crocker gasped. "Tell him I'm sorry." Doc worked to stem the widening stain but to no avail.

"Tell who?" Doc leaned in closer.

Crocker's voice began to fade. It was barely a whisper now. "Caje --tell Caje I'm sorry." The last words faded as his head bowed toward his chest.

Doc slid Crocker's body the rest of the way down so he lay on the floor. As he closed the boy's eyes, he answered, "It's ok soldier, I'll tell him."

Saunders signaled for Kirby to get down. He pointed ahead and to the right. Four Germans were spread out along an embankment. They were firing across the front and left side of the house. Kirby tapped the sergeant on the shoulder. He nodded toward the single soldier by the well.

On the Sarge's order, the BAR and the Thompson sprang to life. The enemy quickly turned their attention to this new menace behind them. They strafed the American's position with machine gun fire. Saunders and Kirby kissed the ground.

With no fire coming his way, Nelson rose up and ran forward. He pulled the pin on a grenade and counted to five before throwing it into the enemy's midst. The explosion threw a cloud of dirt and dust into the air. When it settled back to earth, there was no movement from the German position.

A single bullet tore the bark from a tree beside Kirby's head. Turning the B.A.R., he started to fire at the remaining soldier. Before the private could get into position, a slug slammed into his upper arm. The heavy gun fell to the ground with Kirby close behind.

Saunders turned from Kirby in time to see Littlejohn come through the front door and dispatch their final enemy. A sudden silence replaced the sounds of battle.

The Sergeant helped Kirby to his feet. "Nelson, Littlejohn check out the Krauts."

Kirby sat down in the chair next to the Cajun, his eyes searching his friend's face. Sweat beaded on the wounded man's features, sliding downward and forming small rivulets that disappeared into the sheets. "Let me see that Kirby," Doc said. He felt the medic tugging at his hand, pulling it away from his bloodied arm.

Kirby let go but his eyes never left Caje. "He ain't doin' too good, is he Doc?"

"No, not so good," he replied softly.

"We've got to get him some help soon." Doc's eyes turned to Caje. "I gave him some more morphine not long ago."

For the first time, Kirby looked at the medic. "Will he walk again? I mean, he ain't gonna be a cripple, is he?"

Doc exhaled slowly. "I don't know Kirby. I really don't know." The medical man finished cleaning and bandaging the shallow wound. "There you go. It's not too bad."



Doc had lost Kirby's attention again. "He can't be---of all people, not Caje." The private's words faded as he spoke and Doc decided to leave the two men alone. He walked out into the other room, quietly closing the door behind him.

The injured man groaned and tossed his head in some restless, drug-induced dream. Kirby could barely hear the faint mumbling of French phrases as Caje conversed with some unknown entity. "Now you know I don't understand none of that French stuff." Kirby waited, hoping that his words would get through.

< Leave me here. Make the Sarge get everyone out.>

"I wish I knew what you was saying but whatever it is, we're gonna get you some help. You can't leave old Kirby alone with this bunch. Who else would put up with me?" The private felt the sting of unbidden tears as they clouded his vision.

< Don't let them move me. I don't want to live if I can't use my legs. Please Kirby, let me die here.>

Kirby's head jerked up. "Did I hear you say my name? That's right buddy, I'm here." He reached forward and squeezed Cajé's hand.

< My friend. > Cajé squeezed back.

"Hey, I understood that; you told me that before. *Mon ami*—that means my friend." The private's face lit up with a wide grin.

Cajé's eyes cleared and focused on the man who sat beside him. "*Bon ami.*"

Saunders cursed himself for not bringing a radio. He'd thought it only a recon, brief and non confrontational. He snorted out a bitter laugh. How many times had he thought the same thing and something had gone wrong? Now Crocker was dead, Kirby was wounded, and Cajé--Cajé hung somewhere in between. Taking a deep drag, he let the smoke drift out into the night air. He knew what they had to do. As soon as it was light, they'd head back to command. Hanley needed to know the Germans were in the area and if Cajé stood any chance at all, they needed to move quickly. He slipped back into the house and went to wake Littlejohn for his turn at sentry duty.

The large private woke with a start. He shook his head, trying to knock the last remnants of sleep from his groggy mind. "I'm awake Sarge. Just give me a minute." He struggled to his feet. "Still quiet out there?" he asked.

"Yeah, I haven't seen anything. But keep alert; we move out in the morning." The tired sergeant lowered the Thompson to his side. He saw the private hesitate. "Something on your mind, Littlejohn?"

"It's Cajé, Sarge. Doc says if he's moved, he may be crippled but if he isn't, he'll die." Littlejohn waited for a reply.

"That about sums it up. Why do you ask?" Saunders replied.

"Well, I just wonder how I'd feel if I was Cajé." The private picked up his rifle. "I mean, I'm just this big guy who can't move too good but Cajé; well, have you every really watched him, Sarge? Everything is smooth and effortless." Littlejohn stopped abruptly. Looking down, he hoped to hide his embarrassment. "I guess I notice because he's so different from me."



"Not being able to walk would be hell for any man, Littlejohn but you're right, it would be a special kind of hell for Cajé." He gestured toward the front door. "Wake Stevens up in two hours."

The earliest light of the new day crawled over the window sill. The men were already on their feet waiting for Saunders to give the order to move out. Kirby, Nelson, and Littlejohn took

comfort in the silence of each other's company while Stevens isolated himself near the front door.

Saunders watched Cajé's uneven breathing from the corner of the bedroom. He had settled down there once Littlejohn had relieved him, sleeping in fitful bursts. Doc slept in the chair next to the bed, waking at intervals to check on his patient.

The sergeant had listened to Cajé's periodic ramblings, an occasional word of English thrown in between the French. He had made up his mind that they would leave at dawn and there was no question about Cajé staying behind. Saunders stretched and got to his feet. "Doc---Doc, it's time to move out."

It didn't take much for the medic to become fully alert. His first thoughts were for Cajé. He reached forward and let his fingers slip onto the pulsating artery in the wounded man's neck. Too rapid, he thought, too rapid and too weak. He shook his head in frustration. There was nothing he could do for the man out here. "I'm ready, Sarge," he replied.

"Get him ready. I'll send in Nelson and Littlejohn to help make a stretcher." Saunders turned to leave but stopped when he heard Cajé call out.

The scout's thin face was shadowed with dark stubble and pale beneath the weather-beaten tan. His large, expressive eyes seemed even bigger as he looked at his sergeant. "Please, Sarge---." The words were muffled by pain.

"Look, Cajé, we're not leaving you here so get that out of your head. You're going back with the rest of the squad." Saunders was past being gentle. He needed the man to get mad, to fight back. Maybe that anger would keep him alive. He walked away, not waiting for a reply.

Doc listened without commenting, his eyes darting between the two men. He waited a moment after Saunders left than pulled the quilt away from Cajé's back. The dressing remained dry. "I want you to drink some water then I'll give you some morphine." It was hard to position the glass for the injured man to drink but somehow Doc managed.

The scout was quiet but Doc saw that the muscles in his jaw were tense and his eyes were narrowed. "You can't blame him," Doc offered. "He's doing what he thinks is best."

Cajé pushed the words out on a soft rush of air. "Would he still think it best if he were lying here?" He turned away and closed his eyes when he felt the familiar prick of the needle.

"Kirby, can you still handle that gun?" Saunders asked. The squad had assembled outside. Cajé's makeshift stretcher lay on the ground. Doc had bundled as many blankets as he could find over the unresisting man.

'Yeah Sarge, I'm fine," he answered.

"Ok, take the rear. Nelson take point. Stevens, you and Doc, take Cajé." Saunders noticed the look of frustration and anger that crossed Stevens' face. "You got something to say Stevens?"

He looked down at Cajé then back at the sergeant. "No, I ain't got nothing to say, not now anyway."

"Then move out!" Saunders decided now was not the time for a confrontation with Stevens. He had no idea if the Germans were between themselves and the CP and he couldn't risk any more delays in getting Cajé back.

Saunders kept his squad at a brisk pace. If they didn't run into any Kraut patrols, they'd be back by dusk. The terrain was rough, with thick undergrowth beneath the sparsely scattered trees. The sergeant called a halt when he heard Doc ask for a chance to check Cajé's bandages.

"How is he Doc?" Saunders knelt down next to the stretcher.

"The same," Doc answered. He was afraid that the bouncing around wouldn't do Cajé any good but he had no way to tell, so he kept his fears to himself. "No more bleeding."

When Saunders looked up, he saw the worried faces of Littlejohn and Kirby. Stevens sat on a nearby boulder. "Ten more minutes," he said, "then we go. I'll go out to meet Nelson." After one more look at Cajé, the sergeant moved forward.

Stevens waited until Saunders was out of sight then mumbled just loud enough for the other squad members to hear. "Don't know why we're draggin' a dead man."

Kirby launched himself toward the replacement but Littlejohn grabbed him, pinning his arms. "Shut up Stevens," the towering private growled. "Nobody here is dead."

"Might as well be and he's only slowin' us down." Stevens didn't move.

"Let me go." Kirby twisted, trying to get away but Littlejohn held fast. "The only dead man around here'll be you."

Everything stopped when they heard Cajé cry out. <My God---no more.> His body twisted with spasms that reached out and clutched at the muscles in his back and legs.

Doc bent close to the tormented man. "Hang on, Cajé; just a little while longer."

Seeing his friend's anguish, Kirby stopped struggling. "Let me go."

"You aren't gonna do nothing stupid are you?" Littlejohn asked.

"Naah--- I ain't gonna do nothing." Kirby scowled at Stevens. "Just let me go." Pulling away, he knelt beside the medic. Kirby had never felt helpless before. He'd been a tough kid and an even tougher man; instincts honed on the streets and now on battlefields of France. Having to stand by and watch a friend suffer only confused and frustrated him. "Can't ya do nothin, Doc?"

"There's not much I can do. He needs a doctor." Doc reached into the bottom of his sack and pulled out the last of the morphine. "Hope this will hold him until we get back." With practiced ease, he plunged the drug into Cajé's arm.

The sound of footsteps brought Kirby to his feet. He reached for the B.A.R. and swung it toward the noise. Saunders and Nelson appeared.

"Get Cajé into that hedgerow quick and the rest of you follow. Kraut patrol coming. Keep down and keep quiet." Saunders led the way into a shallow depression guarded by a thin row of trees.

The men pushed themselves against the still wet earth of early spring; doing their best to blend in with the meager cover. Doc lay next to the unresponsive scout hoping Cajé wouldn't pick this time to come around.

Each man stared over the small rise waiting for the enemy to appear. Kirby was next to his sergeant, fingers twitching near the trigger of the B.A.R. Littlejohn and Nelson exchanged looks while Stevens' face gave no inkling of what he might be thinking.

Slowly coming into view, the German patrol walked parallel to the American's position. The squad watched as the enemy passed them by. Even as they disappeared, Saunders continued to signal his men to stay where they were. Each ensuing minute seemed like an eternity but the men of first squad held their position.

Finally, the sergeant said. "OK, move out---same positions."

He thought about it later but came to the same conclusion. There was no way he or anybody else could have known: the patrol that had just passed them doubled back. They were caught completely unaware as the bullets bounced off the thin scattering of trees that surrounded them. "Hit it," Saunders shouted above the storm of incoming fire.

The sergeant took a quick inventory of his men. He saw that Kirby had been able to duck behind a low outcropping of rock, only just big enough to give one man cover. Nelson hugged a good-sized oak showing himself just long enough to fire. Saunders stared helplessly at what he saw next. Cajé lay on the ground, his legs twisted into an unnatural position. His head lolled against his chest as Littlejohn and Doc pulled him toward the shelter of a narrow ditch. Stevens' body lay sprawled on the ground near the head of the stretcher.

The bark of the tree Saunders hid behind became projectiles as enemy bullets sprayed across the trunk. He felt the sting of the missiles as they bit into his cheek. The sound of

Littlejohn's rifle added to the others and he watched as the German patrol dodged from cover to cover, advancing toward their position. He signaled to Kirby, letting him know he was going to try to flank to the left. The private nodded in understanding and increased his fire. Nelson had also seen and followed Kirby's lead.

Carefully the veteran sergeant crawled to the left. If he could make it to the tree line, he had a chance. He felt the blood sheet down across his cheek dripping down beneath his collar. He ignored it, just as he had to ignore the picture of Cajé lying crumpled on the ground. The only thing that mattered now was destroying the enemy. He pushed himself behind the hedgerow and froze. Listening to his own harsh, short breathes; he waited to see if he'd been spotted. When he didn't draw any fire, Saunders began moving again.

The grenades made graceful arcs against the soft blue of the spring sky. The enemy had made a last, fatal mistake. They had stayed close together, as they advanced on the Americans. Kirby and Littlejohn finished those who had not been killed in the successive blasts.

The exhausted squad gathered around Cajé and Doc. They watched in silence as the medic straightened the Cajun's legs. His efforts drew a moan from the wounded man. "Easy, Cajé," he said. "It won't be long now."

Kirby walked over to where Stevens lay. "Guess he was right Sarge; everybody's luck runs out sooner or later."

Doc felt his head drop as he fought to stay awake. He wasn't surprised. He'd been sitting at Cajé's bedside since the surgery was completed. Ordinarily, Cajé would have been evacuated with this kind of injury but the doctors knew he would never survive the trip. The decision was made to do what they could to save the private's life at the aid station.

His thoughts were interrupted by a soft call for water. "Hey Cajé, how ya feelin'?"

"They burn Doc. My legs feel like they're on fire." Cajé grunted with the pain.

"That's good---that's a good sign," Doc answered. A wide smile covered the medic's face.

Cajé closed his eyes for a moment then opened them again. "The squad Doc, tell me about the guys."

Doc hesitated but knew this man would only tolerate the truth. "We lost Crocker and Stevens. Everyone else is ok."

'I'm sorry about the kid," he replied. <So young---too young.> Cajé drifted off into sleep once more.

"Yeah, me too." He knew Cajé was beyond hearing. "When your feeling better, I've got a message for you." He turned and walked out into the quiet night.

He met Saunders just outside the entrance to the barn. "Thought you'd be sound asleep."

The sergeant blew a stream of smoke into the night sky. "How's Cajé?"

"He has feeling in both his legs. The doctor's say everything's still pretty swollen in there but they're optimistic."

"That's good Doc." Saunders' face was an unyielding mask.

"You gonna go see him, Sarge?" The medic waited patiently for an answer.

Saunders didn't answer. "Good night Doc." The medic watched his sergeant until he faded into the darkness.



***** ***** *****

Saunders stood staring down at Cajé's pale features. He rubbed his tired eyes and let out a long held breath. His shoulders slumped and suddenly the last two days caught up with him.

When he looked down again, he saw Cajé looking back at him. He didn't know what to say or rather, he didn't know how to say what he wanted to.

"Cajé, I---."

"It's alright, Sarge---sit down."

The End