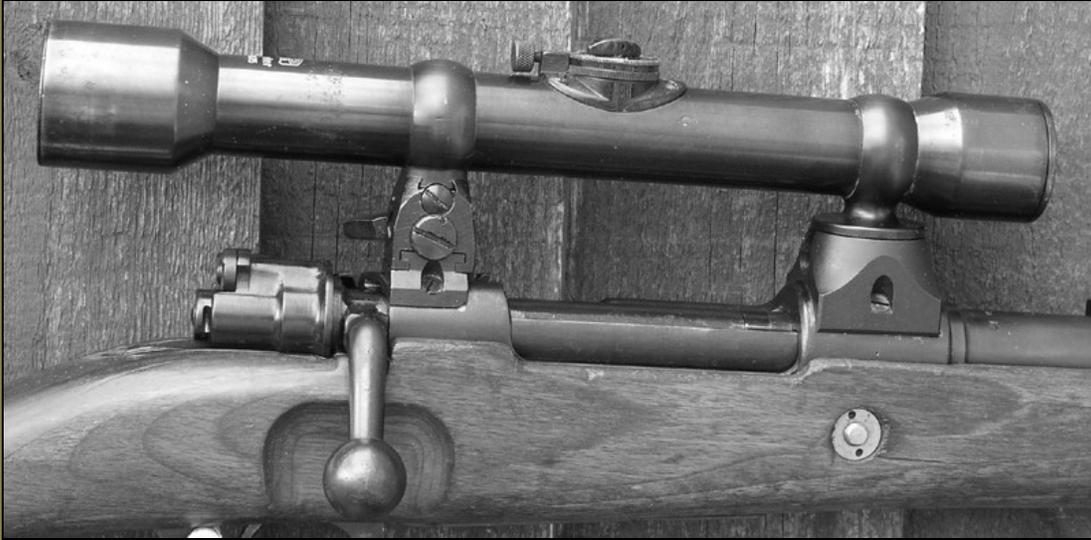


# Through the Looking Glass

By B  
With ER  
ssnquick@yahoo.com



“Do we need to play Go Fish, Billy, or do you think you can keep up?” Littlejohn smiled at his friend. Billy was hunched over his cards, alternately licking and biting his lower lip as he surveyed the latest hand he’d been dealt.

“It’s a good thing we switched to playing for pocket change.” Kirby took a deep drag on his Lucky and then re-shuffled his cards, leaning into the table. “Oops.” He reached down and repositioned the folded up letter under the short leg to restabilize the rickety structure. “C’mon, kid, are you gonna do something with that hand, or what?”

Billy coughed lightly and waved a hand through the haze of cigarette smoke that swirled over the table. “All right, all right. Who could see anything through this cloud, anyway. Gimme four.”

A chorus of chuckles erupted from the older members of the squad.

“There’s a three card limit, you know that.” Caje flicked the ash from the end of his cigarette stub and shot the three cards across the table to Billy.

The novice player shifted his new hand of cards around, organizing them slowly in ascending numerical order. After a moment of biting his lip again, he switched them around and lined them up by suit. Finally, Billy threw the cards down on the table in frustration. “Who am I kidding, anyway. If there’s a poker game going on, I should be the furthest one from it. You guys are a buncha sharks.”



The men looked up as the door swung open and Saunders walked in followed closely by a Corporal wearing a strange uniform. The kid’s uniform was a sight to see, even for these battle tested veterans. The green twill fatigues were standard issue, but these had been smeared with what appeared to be dirt, grease, and even some paint. The squad had seen men come and go since Omaha Beach, but they hadn’t seen anyone that looked like this.

Kirby, not one to let an opportunity go by, greeted the new comer to the squad with one of his usual sarcastic remarks. “What gives, battalion supply runnin’ out of clean uniforms now?”

As he guffawed at his observation and looked for the support of his squad mates in appreciation of the joke, he noticed that they had leaned forward, mouths agape. Following their gaze back to the corporal, the strange appearance of the uniform was suddenly forgotten. Kirby saluted the scoped, bolt action rifle with a soft, envious whistle.

The rifle was far from army issue. It had a raised Monte Carlo stock and a thick, heavy-walled, matte blue steel barrel sitting comfortably on a bed of dark walnut. The wood, detailed with the intricate checkering of a skilled craftsman and probably polished to a high gloss at one time, was now meticulously subdued with sandpaper. The standard iron sights had been replaced by a telescopic sight which spanned the length of the receiver.

“When’d the Army start issuing those? Not sayin’ I’d give up old Bertha, mind.”

Saunders looked at his squad and shook his head, wondering if they would have reacted any differently if a pretty nurse were standing next to him. He interrupted the ogling of the rifle with an introduction. "All right, everyone, listen up. This is Corporal Cooper. He's on loan from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Battalion, and he's going to accompany us on the next mission."

"Sniper, huh?"

Cooper allowed a simple nod, not comfortable with adding unnecessary background information to the discussion.

"Kid ain't much of a talker, is he?"

With slightly narrowed eyes, he caught the soldier's sarcastic comment to his squad mate.

Saunders, as usual, chose to ignore the remark from his resident troublemaker. "There's reliable intel that a high profile target will be within striking distance in the next two days."

"Oh yeah?" Littlejohn perked up. "Who's that?"

"Field marshal von Kluge."

"The guy in charge of the German forces in the West?"

"The same." Saunders waited a moment for the news to sink in. "Once we're in location, we are to support and protect Corporal Cooper until he has had time to complete his mission. Cajé, Kirby... we move out in one hour. Leave your packs here, take double ammo, and extra rations."

Cooper piled his gear against the barn wall as the men started to pick up their cards and clean off the poker table. Kirby handed the roughly stacked deck to Billy and tapped Cajé on the arm. With a head nod, he pulled his friend toward the door, where Saunders stood studying a map.

Kirby, for once, spoke quietly as he leaned into his sergeant and jostled him with an elbow. "Hey, Sarge, ain't he kinda young to be a sniper?"

Saunders barely spared the two men a glance, but his voice was slightly annoyed as he stretched his map out again. "He's got a 96 percent qualification rating. That's all you need to know."

Cajé had caught Cooper's eye for a moment before the kid bent again to the task of preparing his gear. "Sarge, there's a big difference between skill and experience."

"I know."



\*\*\*\*\*

Well into enemy territory by mid-day, the sun's rays fought against the canopy of leaves to reach the forest floor, creating beams of dancing lights against the shadows. As the squad approached the base of the forested hill, Saunders held up his fist to indicate he wanted everyone to stop. As his eyes continued to scan the area ahead for

any sign of danger, he motioned for everyone to conceal themselves while he reached into his field jacket pocket and removed the folded map of the area.

“Take ten while I check our position. Cajé, scout up ahead and make sure we don’t get surprised by a Kraut patrol.”

He stared warily through the trees with an uneasy feeling, blaming caution on being so far behind in their trek across the front with just the four of them. He watched as the Cajun moved stealthily away from them, glancing over his shoulder at the remainder of the squad while he refolded the map. Kirby was halfway through a chocolate bar while watching Cooper clean the optics on his rifle.

The peaceful respite was abruptly shattered by the staccato bursts of a German machine gun and peppered with enemy rifle fire. Kirby and Cooper were on their feet and on a dead run to keep up with Saunders as he surged through the forest in the direction of the gunfire. He slid to a stop behind a tree as the two junior soldiers took positions to his left and right.

Saunders could make out Cajé pinned down behind a log, dirt and wood chips filling the air around him. The scout must have been able to sneak right up to the Krauts before they saw him, because he was within forty yards of their well-placed machinegun nest, with no possibility of withdrawal from the base of the ridge.



Saunders crouched down and sat back on his heels, watching the flash from at least three more muzzles erupt to spit bullets at his scout. As he raised his arm to motion Kirby and Cooper to the right for a flanking move, a single shot rang out from behind him and the machine gun fell silent. Saunders spun around, searching for the source of the noise. Cooper was on one knee, resting the barrel of his rifle on a large knotty stump, working the bolt on his rifle to eject the spent cartridge.

At the top of the hill, muffled orders barked out in German between short staccato rifle bursts, and a lone figure sped through the blue, gun powder haze toward the machine gun nest to pick up the assault. Before Saunders could say anything to Cooper about revealing their position, the sniper had snapped the bolt down to feed a new round into the breach. As the machine gun sprang to life once more, shooting bullets blindly across the ridge in an attempt to find the sniper, another shot cracked across the glade and the nest fell silent again.

Momentarily gaining a reprieve from the hail of fire, Saunders motioned to Kirby and the BAR man rolled to his feet, disappearing into the brush. A few seconds later, two Mausers picked up the assault, alternating between Cajé’s position and their own, forcing Saunders to flatten himself behind the tree. He peered around the edge and caught a glimpse of a German. Instead of running across the intervening space, he was crawling low, slowly trying to make his way to the heavier weapon that had already cost two men their lives. They seemed to be learning. Unfortunately, the new strategy wouldn’t make a difference. He made it about half way there before Cooper’s rifle cracked again and dropped him in a ditch.

The German fire stopped. After a long pause, figures emerged on the hill, scrambling to their feet in a frantic bid to escape. They weaved through the trees for about thirty yards before the familiar sound of Kirby's BAR put an exclamation point on the skirmish.

Saunders ignored the rustling at his side, watching in silence as Kirby loped over to Cajé and helped the scout stand. Satisfied that his men were okay, the sergeant turned his attention to Cooper.

"You could have gotten us all killed. They had no idea we were here until you opened fire. If there had been more of them, we might have lost the element of surprise and brought more trouble than we could handle down on our position." *And you could have gotten yourself killed. That'd end this mission real fast.*

The sniper stopped his search through the dry autumn leaves for his spent casings as he looked questioningly at Saunders. "Look, Sarge, I saw Cajé in trouble and knew I could take that machine gunner out from here. I didn't mean to cause any trouble."

Saunders blue eyes bored into Cooper as he spoke. "Next time, wait for my signal. My job is to get you to the target in one piece and avoid engagements at all costs... and I mean all costs. Now let's get up to that ridge and get out of here before the whole German army comes to check on us."

As the two approached the machine gun placement, Kirby had pulled out his lighter and was firing up his friend's cigarette. The two men were finding it hard to believe that the kid didn't have a few more years of combat experience under his belt than they'd originally thought.

Cajé inhaled deeply, still caught in the afterglow of adrenaline. "That was some shooting, Cooper."

"I could have sat back and finished my chocolate bar while you finished off these Krauts!" Kirby laughed, finding himself more at ease with the young soldier.

Letting his eyes quickly scan the surrounding area, Saunders put an abrupt end to the celebratory mood, "All right, knock it off. For all we know the whole German army is heading this way. Cajé, take the point."



\*\*\*\*\*

Having narrowly escaped unscathed from the last skirmish, the Cajun used a little more prudence as they continued to move further into occupied territory. The squad managed to avoid three other German positions during the afternoon, but there seemed to be fewer and fewer Krauts the further behind the front they moved. As twilight approached, Saunders glanced at the sky, and then led the squad along narrow game trails into an area of thick, thorny briars until they reached the base of a large

hemlock tree near the edge of a field. The ground was clear under the boughs of the evergreen, except for a layer of small pine needles.

“Okay, we’ll spend the night here. Cooper, you’re on watch first. Cajé and Kirby, eat some chow and get some sleep.”

Kirby leaned against the base of the tree and slowly let his body slide down the rough bark until he was sitting on the ground. With great effort, he began unlacing his boots. “My dogs feel like we covered fifty miles today. Where are we anyway, Sarge?”

“I figure we’re about twenty miles behind enemy lines, which leaves just over thirty miles to the checkpoint.” As the squad let out a collective groan, Saunders noticed Cooper beginning to clean his rifle. He let out a soft sigh and peered into the surrounding darkness, realizing that the odds were stacked against all four of them making it back alive from this mission.

\*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*

Saunders felt like his eyes had just slid shut when Kirby quietly shook his shoulder. “Sarge, we have company.”

Rolling to his knees with his Thompson at the ready, Saunders followed Kirby’s gaze across the field to the east. In the early morning glow, he could make out a Kraut patrol of six soldiers heading in their direction. The enemy was too close to make a move without risking blowing their cover, so he had to hope they would pass by. A quick turn of the head brought the assurance that everyone in the squad was awake and alert and doing their best to conceal themselves in the brush. His eyes lingered a moment longer on Cooper, wondering if what he’d said back at the ambush would sink in. The kid’s posture was tense, rifle at the ready, but he wasn’t jumping the gun this time. He would wait.

From experience, Kirby and Cajé knew enough to wait for Saunders to initiate any contact, so as soon as the Thompson gave a quick burst, it was quickly joined by the BAR and a Garand. Taken by surprise out in the open, well in their own territory, the Germans never knew what hit them. In less than two minutes, the squad was moving cautiously out through the weeds to check the bodies. As they came within a few feet of the carnage, a lone figure shot up and started running back through the field in the distance.

Cajé pointed with his Garand. “Sarge...out there.”

“Damn, the whole German army is going to be looking for us.” Quick movement at his side drew the sergeant’s attention. Cooper had his rifle up, resting it in the fork of a tree. Arms steady, he glassed the fleeing soldier through his scope.

“I can take him.”

Saunders paused only a moment, knowing that the whole mission rested on the accuracy of the shot. “Take him”.

Cooper released half a breath and then held steady as his finger pressed slowly on the trigger.



As the retreating soldier neared the far side of the field, he paused to look back toward the squad's position, now at least 800 yards away. The crack of the Winchester was still echoing around the clearing as the men watched the German soldier stand there, unaware that he might be taking his last breath. Just as Kirby's shoulders sagged with the belief that Cooper had missed, the Kraut clutched at his chest, dropped to his knees, and disappeared from sight.

Eyes narrowed, senses still completely centered on his target, the sniper barely heard Kirby call out *grenade!* before the world exploded.

\*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*

Cooper groaned, wincing as the pain registered. "What happened?" Cajé was leaning over him, cutting his right sleeve with a bayonet.

The scout slid the sharp weapon back in its scabbard, pulled a packet out and started dusting sulfa over the sniper's neck and arm. "One of the Krauts was still alive. He managed to toss something your way." From somewhere, Cajé had come up with material to fashion a makeshift sling and he began measuring and folding.

"Just feel lucky you're not dead, kid."

Cooper turned his head to see Kirby sitting on his other side. The sniper grimaced in pain at the fire that shot down his neck and arm with the movement. "I'll never be able to crawl into position like this. Dammit, I can't believe we made it this far just to have it go to hell!"

"Cajé can do it." Saunders' voice was a quiet counterpoint to Cooper.

Kirby snorted as he glanced around at his squad mates. Saunders was grim, face set and determined. Cajé, on the other hand, was looking into the distance, eyes unfocused, as he considered what was being asked of him. "You gotta be kiddin'!" Kirby challenged.

Cooper was shaking his head. "It won't work. Even if Cajé somehow crawls inch by inch across half a mile of open fields without being seen, he'd still have to hit a target the size of a canteen at over 800 yards. And that's with using a rifle he's never shot, plus all of the other countless variables."

As Cooper spoke, Kirby's frown deepened. "Wait a minute, Sarge, what about me? I'm a better shot than Cajé."

"I know, Kirby. But this also requires stealth. Something you don't have. Cajé is second best in the squad at marksmanship, that'll have to do." Saunders ran his fingers through his hair. "The telescopic sight is set for a particular distance no matter who's shooting, right?"

"It's not that easy, sergeant." Cooper gasped as Cajé pulled his arm into the sling. "Your hold has to be calculated based on the ballistic trajectory, range to target, the air temperature, wind velocity and direction."

Saunders weighed their chance of success as he watched his scout crouch next to Cooper, listening in silence to the sniper's concerns. Although he didn't want to abandon the mission, he also didn't want to force Cajé into a no win scenario. Finally, the scout shifted his gaze to the rifle and then looked past the trees in the direction of the chateau. After a few beats, he closed his eyes, as if trying to absorb the information

he'd been given, then stood up and nodded to Saunders.

"We'll be in position later this morning." The sergeant shouldered his Thompson, hearing the satisfying rattle of the metal buckles and fittings. "That'll give you the rest of the day to teach Cajé everything he needs to know. Let's move out. Kirby, take point."

Before he could offer any more objections, Kirby had helped Cooper to his feet, while Cajé picked up the Winchester with reverence.

Kirby held back for a moment to speak to his friend. "You're crazy, what kind of chance ya got to pull this off?"

Cajé shrugged. "Better than most, I guess, and not as good as others."

\*\*\*\*\*



Lying just below the crest of the ridge, Saunders peered through the field glasses at the chateau that was over a mile away. Even at this distance he could make out the bee's nest of activity around their objective. Not only did they have roaming guards and dog units circling the walls surrounding the chateau, but during the last hour, he had counted at least five pairs of perimeter guards randomly crisscrossing the surrounding fields and wooded areas between the squad's position and the distant structure.

Saunders turned toward Cooper and watched as the sniper tried to help Cajé, one-handed, strategically stuff handfuls of long, dry grass into the netting of the field jacket he'd loaned the scout. During it all, the sniper spoke almost non-stop, trying to condense years of training into a few hours of mentoring, knowing the smallest bit of information could mean the difference between life and death.

"I don't see a way for us to get you any closer, Cajé. It's all open fields from here. We'd be spotted by the patrols."

The remainder of the day was spent drilling Cajé on every conceivable topic. Cooper spent at least an hour discussing every available shadow, tree line, and contour of the terrain between the two possible locations they had selected for the shot. The favored position would offer a better chance of a successful shot by getting Cajé a lot closer, but had a greater risk of detection. The second position was safer, but the shot was over two hundred yards further. Cajé would have to make his own determination based on his comfort level.

After the sniper felt that Cajé understood the routes and the tactics involved, they moved on to the escape. Cooper stressed over and over again how a surprised enemy would have a hard time locating the source of a single shot, so remaining motionless

was a necessity. Also, even though the sniper was adept at staying concealed no matter what the conditions were, he instructed Cajé to move only during darkness.

The bulk of their time was spent reviewing the shot itself. From identifying the target, knowing how to breathe and pulling the trigger, to calculating what seemed like endless variables. Cooper had Cajé dry fire the rifle with his eyes closed several times to become familiar with the feel of the custom, feather light, trigger mechanism and the break point for the firing pin.

Listening to the complicated details that would factor into the success or failure of the mission, Saunders was having second thoughts. He knew that Cajé had, in effect, volunteered, but he also knew that Cajé would never turn him down when asked to do something. "What do you think Cajé?"

Reading the concern in his Sergeant's face made Cajé all the more determined. "I'm getting it, Sarge. Cooper here is a pretty good teacher. I'll be ready to move out by nightfall."

They spent the last hour rearranging different vegetation into the netting on the back, arms and legs of Cajé's borrowed uniform and helmet. After carefully wrapping his rifle in additional netting, Cooper had Cajé give it the same treatment. By the time twilight was approaching, Cajé looked more like a pile of weeds than an Army soldier.

Despite the assorted foliage, Cajé still managed to appear next to Saunders and Kirby in relative silence. His voice was soft in the growing twilight, the familiar Cajun accent affecting the speed and cadence of the words. "After it gets dark, I'll slip along that finger of trees on the right. Then, I'll try to work through the field until I'm in range."

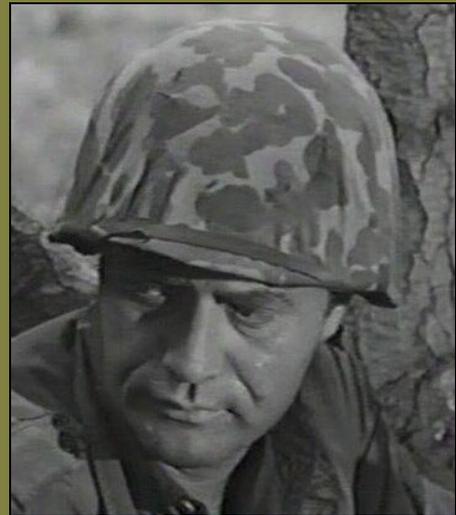
Saunders studied the private, appreciating the calm he exuded, knowing that very soon, he would be surrounded by the enemy and beyond their help. All in an effort to see if he could kick the hornets' nest and make it back without getting stung.

Even Kirby's voice held a note of concern for his friend as he shook his head. "I still say you're nuts."

Cajé smiled his acknowledgement as he surveyed the route from their vantage point one last time. Soon, a blanket of darkness covered the area and stars filled the sky as he tapped Saunders on the shoulder.

Saunders nodded, his expression hidden by shadow. "Good hunting, I'll see you tomorrow night." *I hope.*

The Cajun glanced momentarily at Kirby and Cooper before slipping over the ridge and disappearing into the shadows.



\*\*\*\*\*

Saunders rubbed grubby fingers across his eyes as the early morning sunlight roused him from a light sleep. Automatically, he scanned the immediate area as his hand tightened on the stock of his Thompson, pulling the weapon into a more

comfortable and usable position. Kirby was still on watch at the edge of the ridgeline, lying on his belly in the dirt, peering intently through the field glasses. As Saunders started shuffling over to Kirby's position, Cooper grunted in his sleep, the pain of his wounds making him restless. The sargeant moved up alongside his BAR man and Kirby lowered the glasses, eager to give a report. "All quiet, so I guess he's okay."

Roused out of his fitful sleep from Saunders' passing, Cooper crawled slowly away from the fallen tree he'd been propped against. He was eventually successful at reaching the two men, staying low to the ground with a modified crawl, dragging himself with his good arm. When he arrived, he was breathing heavily, eyes sunken. "Did he make it into position?"

Kirby shrugged his shoulders. "Don't know. Even with these field glasses, I can't see him." He offered them to Saunders.

After scrutinizing the route a dozen times, Saunders shook his head and passed the glasses on to Cooper, hoping that the skills of the sniper would bring better results.

It took nearly fifteen minutes, but Cooper finally spotted the heel of one of Caje's boots through the grass and weeds at the favored of the two positions. Saunders and Kirby each took turns glassing the spot Cooper indicated before finally seeing what the sniper assured them was a boot.

If their intelligence was right, the VIP's were scheduled to arrive in the early afternoon, which was probably why there seemed to be twice as many patrols roaming the area as before. From their OP, Saunders and Kirby kept a constant vigilance over Caje, the squad's newly trained sniper, knowing they were powerless to do anything more than watch his progress.

Twice during the day they'd had to retreat from their position on the ridge when German patrols wandered too close for comfort. They'd just returned to the ridge after the second close call when they saw two Krauts walking right toward Caje's position. Despite knowing that the mission would be compromised if he took action, Kirby was already reaching for the BAR at his side when he was stopped by a hand pushing the barrel down into the dirt.

"Hold it, Kirby."

"Sarge, that's Caje out there."

Not usually one for physical contact, Cooper still found himself reaching out with his good arm to touch Kirby's shoulder. If part of the mission depended on keeping Kirby from revealing their position, he would do his best to redirect the BAR man's raw impulsiveness where his friend was concerned. "Saunders is right, you'd never get there in time. Besides, human eyes subconsciously see human shapes and tend to ignore piles of leaves and weeds, so they should walk right by him if he's careful."

\*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*

Caje could hear the footfalls in the tall grass getting closer and closer. Despite his urge to be ready to defend himself, Cooper's words replayed in his head... *freeze, don't move, let them pass*. As the patrol neared his position, it changed direction slightly and stopped directly behind him. Despite envisioning every scenario from a bayonet in the back to the 'better' option of being captured alive and becoming a prisoner of war, he soon heard the light conversational banter of two German soldiers

and the sparking of a cigarette lighter. The smell of tobacco drifted past him, and he fought the urge to turn his head. *Freeze, don't move, let them pass.*

After what seemed like an eternity of controlling his breathing, they stubbed out their cigarettes and continued on their way, unaware that he'd been only ten feet away.

\*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*

The morning drifted into early afternoon as the first Kubelwagen lurched to a stop. The scope's cross hairs settled on the officer exiting the door as it was held stiffly by the driver. Working hard to ignore the sweat running down his back and the thirst for water that had been occupying his mind for the past few hours, Caje took a cleansing breath and forced his mind to concentrate on steadying his reflexes as Cooper had instructed. He was just about to pull the trigger on the rifle, when he realized that the officer exiting the staff car didn't match the description he'd been given.



The same scene played out four more times as other high ranking German officers disembarked from their cars, unaware that death had passed them over today. The last car had barely left the courtyard when another Kubelwagon wheeled toward the chateau, sandwiched by two troop carriers full of elite, stone faced soldiers, led by an armored communication vehicle. Anticipating that the show was about to begin, Caje's mind replayed the instructions. He evaluated the conditions, calculated wind direction and speed, and visualized different possible scenarios for his escape.

The officers that had arrived earlier were already descending the stairs to the courtyard to meet the newest arrival when the convoy eased to a stop. While the guards in the troop carriers piled out to secure the area, the nearest staff officer plumped out his chest like a proud peacock as he opened the rear door on the Kubelwagen. *Ahhh..there's the Field Marshall.*

As Caje's trigger finger applied the last few grams of pressure, the Field Marshall posed regally next to the door so his junior officers could close the remaining distance to greet him.

\*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*

Saunders glassed the courtyard, positive that the target must have finally arrived at the chateau. Even though he was anticipating the shot, it still startled him when it finally happened.

The officers looked momentarily confused as the Marshall dropped next to the staff car. Different levels of training and experience quickly became obvious as a few of the officers continued to stand, turning in circles, while others surrounded their CO. The remaining men scanned the fields and tree lines and shouted orders to their lieutenants.

The Germans fanned out like soldier ants in an effort to locate the intruder and defend their nest.

Saunders lowered the binoculars. "The shot was low, the Field Marshall is holding his leg."

\*\*\*\*\*

Settling the scope over the target after the recoil, Cajé willed his heart to slow from its frantic beat in his chest as he tried to make sense of the chaos. His shoulders sagged as he realized that he had missed the target. As he considered a follow-up shot, Cooper's words echoed in his head, *a surprised enemy will have a hard time locating you from a single shot, shoot twice and he'll have you pinpointed.*

Resigned to the lost objective, Cajé flattened himself to the ground as Kraut soldiers moved out across the landscape to locate his position. Surprisingly, none came closer than thirty yards as they ran past him into the open fields.

\*\*\*\*\*

Saunders pitched the binoculars into the dirt and pulled his camo helmet down across his eyes. With a frustrated sigh, he dropped his head to the ground. As Kirby frowned and made a grab for the glasses he'd thrown aside, Saunders pushed back up and readjusted the helmet. "We have to pull back again. The patrols are heading this way and I don't think they're going to stop at the ridge this time."

Kirby found his fingers curling around his weapon again. "Sarge, we can't just leave Cajé behind. What if they find him? At least if we lay low here, we got a chance to help him."

"Knock it off!" Saunders rolled toward him. "I don't want to leave him behind any more than you do. He knew it going in, and I'm not going to sacrifice you or Cooper or myself in some heroic stand. Now move out."

"You know he's right." Cooper struggled to pull his good arm beneath his shoulder so he could lever himself up on one elbow. "We just have to trust that Cajé can take care of himself until tonight."

Reluctantly grabbing his BAR and edging back away from the side of the ridge, Kirby couldn't help offering one last mumbled comment. "All I know is that I wouldn't leave one of you guys behind."

They pulled back to the north, at least a mile up a shallow creek, before stopping on a hillside that gave them a concealed vantage point. Throughout the afternoon, search planes circled overhead, following pre-planned patterns. German patrols coordinated their hunt on the ground, as they carried on their own relentless, but so far, fruitless search.

\*\*\*\*\*

Cajé tapped his finger and watched the bug roll off the end and scuttle away into the weeds. It seemed that the more things he tried to ignore, the more things bothered him: the sweat running down his back, the itch on the bottom of his foot, the incessant

thirst and hunger. It had been at least an hour since he'd heard the last patrol pass nearby. After that, he'd heard snatches of conversation and shouts off in the distance, and then nothing but the sound of a single search plane, its old engine choking and sputtering. When he'd thought he could stand it no more, footsteps were suddenly crashing through the tall grass from the direction of the chateau. Two German soldiers.

*Freeze, don't move, let them pass...hope they pass.*

Head down, cheek pressed into the dirt, he squeezed his eyes shut against the sweat that made his vision swim. He knew the Germans were headed right for him.

As the lead soldier brushed by his left shoulder, Cajé struck out like a snake and wrapped his fist around the Kraut's ankle, sending him flying into the weeds with a startled cry. Then in a single movement, he rolled to the side, reached for his bayonet and thrust it upward to catch the second soldier under the breastbone in a killing blow. The Kraut's forward momentum knocked Cajé's arm back and ripped the bayonet from his grasp. Cajé threw himself into the weeds and started scrabbling around for his weapon just as the first soldier popped back up. The Kraut stared at him wide-eyed for a millisecond before reaching for his Luger, only to find his hand slapping uselessly at an empty holster. Panicked, the soldier looked down, trying to see where the gun might have fallen, and then flung himself at the ground to join Cajé in a search through the vegetation for lost weapons.

Just as Cajé's dirt-encrusted fingers were about to close on the hilt of his lost bayonet, another hand reached across and grabbed it from him. The German seemed almost as surprised as Cajé that he'd found the weapon first and couldn't seem to keep a fleeting expression of wide-eyed innocence off his face before he grit his teeth and lunged. Stiff from hours of inactivity, Cajé's muscles strained to respond. He jumped back from the deadly swing, as the sharp blade buried itself in his thigh.

Cajé smashed his fist into the Kraut's mouth, sending his head snapping back with a spray of crimson saliva from a torn lip. The Kraut shook his head, dazed, and then bolted forward, reaching for the imbedded knife as the wounded scout crabbed backwards, dragging his right leg. In a sudden cloud of dust and dirt, the enraged German soldier was on him and closing his fingers around the hilt of the bayonet. Choking on a strangled cry as the blade shifted, Cajé managed to secure his hands over the German's on the handle as both men struggled, muscles straining, to gain control.

Stifling a scream, knuckles cracking with the effort to not lose his grip on the German's hands and the knife in his leg, Cajé forced the blade up. Little by little, it released from his muscle, spilling thick blood across his uniform pants.

Cajé kicked out again with his good leg, juggled the bayonet till the blade was in his palm, and tossed the knife. With deadly accuracy, the blade slammed into the Kraut's chest with a thump. Shocked at seeing the hilt of a bayonet protruding from between his ribs, the young man hitched in a frightened breath, coughing as blood filled his throat.

Cajé turned and limped away, only half-hearing the whimper and loud thud as the German fell dead into the weeds behind him. He grabbed the sniper rifle and made his way into the tree line before the pain searing through his leg forced him to a stop. Leaning with his back against a tree, sweat poured into his eyes as he fought shaking hands to sprinkle sulfa powder on his leg and cover the wound with a pressure

bandage. He knew it was only a matter of time before the two dead soldiers were found. Unfortunately, the squad wouldn't be looking for him until nightfall, so a better hiding spot was a priority. Taking a deep breath, he tightened the bandage on his thigh and scurried off into the brush.

\*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*

The Cajun pressed himself tight against the tree at the sound of approaching footsteps through the leaves on the forest floor behind him. He stretched his arm down to grab his bayonet and found his scabbard empty. In despair, his exhausted brain reminded him that he'd left it behind, embedded in a German's heart. Too late now to reach for the rifle, he concentrated on flattening his body and quieting his breathing back down. When the footsteps stopped ten feet away, he knew that he had been spotted.

"Caje, you okay?" came Kirby's whisper.

As he twisted to look over his shoulder he could see the BAR man crouched behind a nearby tree, eyeing him worriedly. "Kirby? What are you doing here?"

"Would ya rather I leave?"

"I'd rather you were a bottle of wine, a shower and a bed."

"The only room service I'm offerin' is a shoulder and a canteen of water."

"I'll take it. Where's Sarge?"

"Up behind the ridge." Kirby looked around, shouldered his BAR, and took Caje's arm. With Kirby supporting him, they hurried up the hill and rejoined Saunders and Cooper.

\*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*      \*\*\*\*\*

Littlejohn ducked beneath the door frame and stepped into the old barn, shaking the mail bag like it was some big canvas Christmas present. His face lit up as he saw Saunders and Kirby dusting themselves off and removing their gear. "Hey, you're back. You guys look awful. Where's Caje and Cooper?"

Saunders pulled out a cigarette as he lowered his Thompson to the ground. "We dropped them off over at the aid tent."

"Oh. Not serious is it?"

"Nah, they'll be fine." Kirby unhooked his ammo belt and harness and stretched and rolled his shoulders before letting the web gear join the BAR on the hay. He scratched at the accumulated dirt on his neck as he watched Saunders light up, trying to decide what sort of "luxury" he wanted first.



"Well, I heard something at HQ that might mean this war is almost over."

Billy strolled over, eyeing the mail bag eagerly. "Whaddidya hear, Littlejohn?"

“Word is that the German Field Marshall you were gunning for committed suicide. At least that’s the story the Germans have released. I heard through the grapevine that he was involved in an assassination attempt against Hitler and Adolph had him... y’know.” Littlejohn pulled his hand swiftly across his neck.

“Well, what d’ya know?” Kirby smiled at Saunders and the two headed for the door.

“Where you guys going?”

“To let Cajé and Cooper know that the mission was a success. Even though someone else ended up making the hit.”

Kirby scratched at his neck again. “And then we’re takin’ a shower.”

The End