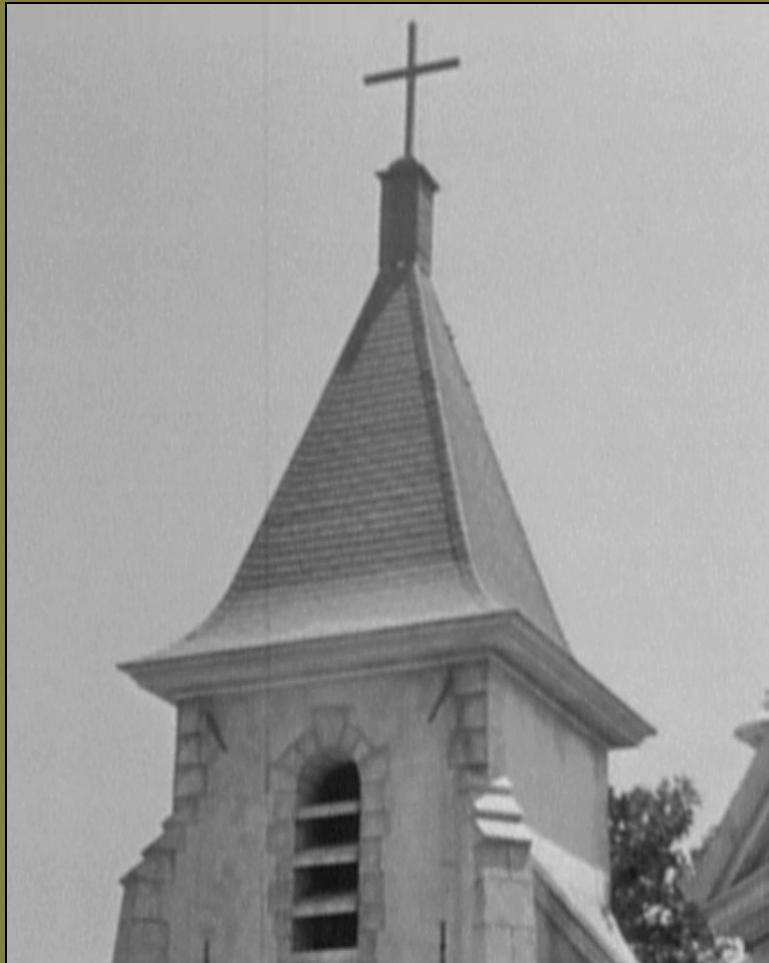


THE POWER OF PRAYER

By CCK
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I wish to dedicate this story to a small group of women who have shown me, over the last year, the true meaning of friendship. They have shown me a true friend is someone who will stand by you no matter what. If it hadn't been for their love and support over this last year, I truly believe I would have given up my writing and my Combat family. Thank you.

The village was deserted, cleared out when the Germans took over. Now it was the Americans' turn. The Germans had fled in the midst of the artillery barrage unleashed by their counterparts the day before. At least the Americans' hoped they had all fled. This village would house the new HQ if an advance squad could verify that fact.

The village was of strategic importance to both sides because of the church steeple that sat on the far end of town. It was the tallest structure in the area and boasted a view for miles around in every direction. Because of this, the village had become a bloody battle field, a battle field that had cost hundreds of lives. This was a fact that Sergeant Chip Saunders hoped to change.

The men of first squad were on high alert. House-by-house they scouted each building in the village and afterward met at the fountain in the main square. A statue of two beautiful maidens stood in the middle of the fountain. They were half naked and Kirby couldn't keep his eyes off them.

"Ain't they lovely, Jackson? A sight to behold," Kirby sighed to himself.

Jackson, who was all of 18, couldn't look at them.

"Gosh, Kirby, they're naked. How can you stare like that?" The young man turned his back.

"Practice, kid, practice," Kirby quipped.

"Okay, Kirby, knock it off." Saunders turned away so that Kirby couldn't see him smile. "Caje, you and Conley check out the church. Kirby, you and Jackson head for the town hall. Littlejohn, you and Billy head for the other end of town. We're looking for a building that can house the HQ and we don't want the big wigs walking into any surprises. Get moving."

The squad acknowledged the orders as they all went their separate ways. Saunders looked back towards the fountain and saw Doc looking at the statues.

"You too, Doc?" Saunders smiled openly this time.

"Uh, what?" Doc sputtered.

"I'd expect it from Kirby, but you?" Saunders pointed to the half naked ladies.

Doc started to laugh. "Well Sarge, I'm just a normal red blooded American boy."

Both men began to laugh when the sound of an explosion filled the air.

"Stay here!" Saunders screamed as he ran towards the sound, Tommy gun at the ready. In front of him he could see the smoke rising from the direction of the church.

Rounding the corner Saunders saw the steeple now lay in ruins. Bricks, wood and plaster filled the yard in front of the church. Caje and Conley were nowhere to be found.

"Jesus!"

Saunders heard Kirby behind him. Slowly they walked towards the church as one by one the rest of the squad joined them from all directions.

"Watch yourself, there could be more booby traps."

"Sarge, where's Caje? He'd know better than to walk into something like this." Kirby whispered; he wasn't sure why.

Saunders just shook his head as he began circling the rubble. Kirby was right, Caje knew better, but Conley was fresh out of the repple depple. He knew if anyone set off a booby trap it would have been him.

"Sarge, Sarge!" Kirby shouted across the devastation. "Over here, I found Caje. He's under here."

Saunders quickly joined the rest of the squad who had begun digging their squad mate out of the rubble.

"Jackson, go get Doc." Saunders started to say when that familiar southern drawl sounded beside him.

"No need, I'm right here."

"Doc, I told you to stay put." Saunders shook his head. "Jackson, set up a watch on the north end of town. Billy, you set up watch on the other side of...uh.... the church."

"But, Sarge..." Billy stopped mid sentence at one look from Saunders. "Yes, Sir."

Knowing the town was covered, Saunders could now concentrate on freeing his injured scout. Laying his Tommy gun to the side, he joined the rest of his squad with the digging.

"Any sign of Conley?" Saunders asked.

"Not so far, Sarge." Doc called over his shoulder. "I can see Caje, but just to his shoulders. The rest is buried. Conley could be further back."

"I sure hope not," Littlejohn quietly spoke.

"What's that, Littlejohn?" Doc was surprised at Littlejohn's remark.

"Well, Doc. It's just..." Littlejohn hesitated. "It's just that if he is further back, well, there's no chance. Is there, Doc?"

Looking at the devastation surrounding them, Doc just shook his head.

The debris was quickly removed, leaving only two large beams that formed an awkward X across Caje's body. Littlejohn placed his shoulder under the first beam and began to lift. A hand on his back stopped him.

"Littlejohn, take the radio off your back." Saunders began to pull the radio from the gentle giants' back. "You can lift that easier without it."

Littlejohn nodded as the radio was removed and placed next to Saunders' Tommy gun. Placing his shoulder back under the beam, he strained to lift the heavy piece of wood off his friend. Groaning with the effort, he felt the beam move just slightly. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he lifted with all his might. Suddenly the beam slid off the other one, landing beside Caje.

With a shocked look on his face, Littlejohn opened his eyes and saw Saunders standing beside him with a long two-by-four in his hands.

"What's that saying, 'Give me a lever and I'll move the world'?" Littlejohn smiled.

"Something like that. Let's get this other one off him," Saunders answered as he placed the two-by-four under the other beam.

The second beam had just started to lift when it began to slide off the two-by-four.

"Pull him out, Doc! Quick, before this beams falls back down!"

Doc grabbed the Cajun under the arms and pulled him free just as the beam crashed back down on to the ground where the scout had just been lying.

"How is he, Doc?" Kirby stood over the medic as he assessed the injured soldier.

"Not good." Doc never looked up from his patient. "Sarge, we need to get him to a hospital and fast. We need to call for an ambulance."

A low moan drew everyone's attention to the man on the ground.

"Conley, don't go in there." Caje began to cry out. "Don't go in there, you hear me. It ain't been cleared yet. Conley, don't."

"It's OK, Caje." Doc tried to calm the scout. "You need to stay still, it's alright."

"Doc, where's Conley?" Caje asked weakly. "Where is he, Doc?"

"We don't know, Caje. We haven't found him yet," Doc answered.

"He's in the church, Doc," Caje whispered as he slipped back into the darkness. "He went into the church."

The four soldiers turned in unison and looked at the rubble that was once the church. They all now knew that Conley would not be going home from this stinking war.

The low rumble of thunder in the distance sent a shiver down Doc's back.



"Sarge, we need to get that ambulance here now."

"That may take some time, Doc. We can build a stretcher and you and Littlejohn can take him back to the aid station. It would probably be faster."

"Can't." Doc pulled back Caje's torn shirt revealing an ugly looking wound in his lower abdomen. "See that. It's a shrapnel fragment against the main artery. We'll be lucky to get him back alive in an ambulance. We wouldn't get a mile bouncing him around on a stretcher. That thing moves and he could bleed to death in minutes."

"Great!" Saunders pushed his helmet back on his head and wiped his forehead on his sleeve. "Kirby, what does the town hall look like?"

"Empty." Kirby stated.

"Can we use it for Caje until the ambulance can get here?" Saunders asked.

"Oh, yeah, it would be perfect."

"Okay, let's move him in there. The last thing he needs is to be out here if that rain hits."

"We need to be really careful when we move him," Doc stated, as he tied the last dressing around Caje's abdomen. "We need to keep him flat, and he needs to stay as still as possible."

"Hey, Doc, will this work?" Littlejohn yelled, holding up a large flat piece of plywood.

"Yeah, Littlejohn that will work great. Bring it over here and lay it right beside him."

Being as gentle as possible, the four soldiers rolled the injured man like a log and placed the plywood under him. Rolling him back, they were all startled by Caje's sudden cry of pain.

"Oh, God!" Caje cried out, his eyes flying open. "It hurts, Doc. It really hurts. Please help me."

"I will, Caje. Take it easy, I'm going to give you something right now." Doc quickly pulled a dose of morphine from his pack and injected it.

"Sarge?" Caje weakly called.

"I'm here, Caje." Saunders knelt beside his scout.

"Did you find Conley?" Caje winced as he felt the injection.

"No."

Caje closed his eyes, tears forming on his lashes. "It's my fault. I should have stopped him from going into the church. I knew it hadn't been cleared. I should have stopped him, I should have st... stop...stopped....." Caje's voice trailed off as he slipped into a drug induced sleep.

"Let's move," Saunders ordered.

The soldiers gathered the radio and their rifles, and Caje was quickly moved from the church to the town hall. Upon entering the building, Doc saw a long table that was wide enough to use as a bed for the injured scout. He also noticed several large vases that amazingly had not been broken in the artillery barrage.

"Let's lay him on here." Doc directed the men to the table. "Kirby, Littlejohn, take some of these vases out to the fountain and fill them with water. I'm going to need plenty to clean these wounds."

"Littlejohn put the radio over here." Saunders indicated another small table in the corner of the room.

"You want me to contact HQ?" Littlejohn began setting up the radio.

"No, I'll do that. Get that water for Doc."

"You got it, Sarge."

Grabbing two vases each, the soldiers headed out for the fountain.

"Checkmate King Two, this is White Rook. Do you read?" Saunders began his attempt to contact HQ. "Checkmate King Two, this is White Rook. Do you read?"

"White Rook, this is King Two." The baritone voice of Lieutenant Hanley could be heard over the radio. "We read you."

"King two, we have reached our objective. However, we have a serious casualty. We're going to need an ambulance right away if we're going to get him back."

"Not possible at this time, White Rook," Hanley replied. "We have reports of possible German advancements that have moved in behind you. You're cut off from us right at the moment. We need a set of eyes on the skyline and report on these movements."

"We have a problem, King Two." Saunders glanced quickly at Doc. "Skyline has been completely destroyed. Unable to give you any reports on troop movements from here."

"Understood, White Rook." Hanley was sure that explained the serious casualty. "If the reports are accurate, they may be heading n your direction. We need you to hold your ground. We'll send you help as soon as we can. King Two, out."

"Roger, King Two." Saunders finished his transmission. "Well, Doc. You heard him. No ambulance for a while."

"They better get one here soon," Doc growled. "Or you're going to need a new scout."

"Is there anything we can do?" Saunders question was filled with concern.

"Pray, Sarge, just pray."

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Kirby and Littlejohn reached the fountain and began filling the vases with the cool water. The two men gathered them up and headed back to the town hall. Kirby stopped suddenly, putting his hand up to stop Littlejohn.

"Did you hear that?" Kirby spoke in hushed tones. "Something's moving over there."

Littlejohn stopped and listened but heard nothing. "I don't hear anything, Kirby. Come on, we got to get this water back to Doc."

"Listen, you take your water back to Doc. I'll be right behind you."

Kirby sat his water at the base of the fountain and walked across the square in the direction the sound had come from.

"Watch your back man." Littlejohn called over his shoulder as he headed back.

Kirby entered a house that sat at the corner of the square. He could tell it had once been very fine, but the shelling had taken its toll. He held the BAR at the ready as he carefully walked through the rooms. He entered what appeared to be the kitchen and looked around. Not finding anything, he turned to leave when he heard movement from behind a door across the room.

Cautiously he walked across the room, the hair on the back of his neck raised, every sense in his body on high alert. Slowly he opened the door and raised the BAR to fire. He stopped short and stared into what looked like a pantry. He was totally surprised at what he saw. Sitting in the far back of the small room was a civilian. He appeared to be in his late fifties and he just sat and stared.

"Hey mister, you okay?" Kirby asked as he cautiously approached the man. "Do you speak English?"

"Yes, young man, I speak English."

"What are you doing here, sir? The village was evacuated. Why didn't you leave with everyone else?"

The older gentleman rose and stood in front of Kirby. The soldier noticed the man looked past him and not at him.

"It was too difficult for me to leave in all the confusion."

The man took a step forward and tripped on a can on the floor. Kirby reached out and caught the gentleman before he fell.

"Thank you, young man." The gentleman righted himself, still not making eye contact.

"Kirby, sir, Private William G Kirby."

Kirby was beginning to realize what the man meant when he said it was too difficult for him to leave.

"Sir, are you...." Kirby trailed off not sure if he should come right out and ask.

"Blind?" The gentleman finished Kirby's question. "Yes, young man, I am. My name is Jean Luc Robere. Dr. Jean Luc Robere."

Kirby took the gentleman by the arm and led him out of the pantry.

"Sir, we're set up at the town hall. Maybe you should join us there. I think it would be safer. You can go back with the ambulance."

"Ambulance, is one of your men hurt, private?"

"Yes, sir," Kirby began. "our scout."

"I'm sorry to hear that, private. This war has taken so many lives, as well as other things." The doctor sighed then stopped suddenly forcing Kirby to halt with him. "Private, in the closet by the front door, grab the black bag that is sitting on the top shelf."

"Sir, we really can't take any luggage with us."

"Private, it's not luggage. It's my medical bag. I may be blind, but I still maybe able to help. I wasn't always blind. Before the war I was a very good doctor."

Kirby truly couldn't believe this man could help, but his thoughts were also of his friend and if this man could do anything, well it was worth a try.

"Okay, wait right here."

Kirby found the closet and the black bag quickly. Taking the gentleman by the arm, the two men headed for the town hall.

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Littlejohn entered the town hall and handed the jugs of water to Doc. Quickly pouring the water in a bowl they had found, Doc gently began cleansing Caje's wound. Carefully he wiped away the blood that had begun to dry, causing the man's uniform to stick to his skin. Doc irrigated the wound, cleaning it as much as possible without disturbing the shrapnel that threaten his friend's life.

Doc's treatment elicited quiet moans from the scout, but when the water entered the wound they became cries of pain. Doc's soft southern drawl calmed the agitated man as he finished his work.

"Littlejohn," Saunders called from the other side of the room. "Where's Kirby?"

"Kirby thought he heard something." Littlejohn reported as he joined his Sergeant. "He went to investigate. He told me to get the water back to Doc, so I did."

"He knows better than to go off without back up." Saunders irritation could be heard in his voice.

"I know Sarge, but you know Kirby." Littlejohn slung his rifle over his shoulder. "You want me to go looking for him."

"No!" Saunders grew more irritated as the moments passed and there was no Kirby. "We'll both go looking for him."

The two soldiers headed out when the doors suddenly burst open.

"Sarge!!!" Jackson entered red faced and short of breath. "They're coming, they're coming!"

"Jackson, stop!" Saunders yelled above the young soldiers' shouts. "Report, who's coming?"

Jackson placed his hands on his knees and took several deep breaths. Now calmer, he began his report.

"I positioned myself at the top of that hill just outside of town. I could see for quite a distance that way. I saw them heading this way. Looks like a whole division, tanks, foot soldiers, armored transports, the works."

"What are we looking at for time, Jackson?" Saunders could see the confused look come over the soldiers' face. "How long do we have, soldier?"

"Oh, well, they're moving slow. I'd guess maybe a couple of hours."

"You guess?" Saunders shook his head. "Littlejohn, get Hanley on the line. Jackson get back to your post and keep me informed."

"Right, Sarge." Jackson called over his shoulder as he ran out the door.

"How's he doing, Doc?" Saunders stepped to his medic's side.

"Not good, his temp is going up. I'm afraid infection is setting in." Doc made eye contact with his Sergeant. "Any chance of getting him out of here?"

"I doubt it, but we'll see."

Taking the radio from Littlejohn, Saunders silently prayed the ambulance was on the way.

"Checkmate King Two, this is White Rook. Do you read?"

"White Rook, this is King Two. Go ahead." Hanley's baritone voice once again came over the radio.

"King Two, we have movement from the north," Saunders started his report. "Movement includes Chorus Girls and Tin Cans. It's looking like a full party."

"Roger, White Rook." Hanley came back, a ting of worry coloring his words. *"Imperative you hold your positions at all cost. Will send back up when available."*

"Roger, King Two." Saunders glanced towards his wounded scout. "Any chance of getting that ambulance here before the party starts?"

"Negative, White Rook." Hanley hated refusing help, but he knew there were no options at this time. *"Yellow Brick Road blocked. Will send at first opportunity.."*

"Yes, sir." Saunders threw the radio handset down. He knew it wasn't Hanley's fault but it tore at him to see one of his men injured and waiting only made it worse. He felt helpless and he didn't like it, not one bit.

"OK, let's go find Kirby." Saunders flung his Tommy gun over his shoulder and headed for the door.

Just then the door swung open and Kirby entered guiding an older man. He helped the man to the closest chair and sat him down.

"Uh, Sarge," The soldier began sheepishly. "I want you to meet Dr. Jean Luc Robere. He was stuck here after the evacuation. I thought it would be better if he came here rather than leave him alone in his house."

"Oh you did, did you?" Saunders berated the soldier. "And you went looking for him all on your own, too."

"Well, Sarge, I knew Doc needed the water, and I heard movement. If I had come back for help that person might have been gone when we got back." Kirby hoped Sarge would buy his story. He hoped wrong.

"Kirby, stupid moves like that cost lives. Next time make sure you have back up."

"Sure, Sarge." Kirby turned to walk away.

"Kirby." Saunders called after him.

"Yeah, Sarge?" Kirby turned back.

"Did you say 'Doctor'?" Saunders felt a small glimmer of hope.

"Yeah, Sarge. He brought his bag with him. He said he might be able to help." Kirby thought this bit of news might get him out of the dog house with his sergeant.



Saunders watched the older man for a few moments. When the doctor began feeling around for his medical bag, Saunders' hopes were dashed.

"He's blind," Saunders whispered. "How can he help?"

Before Kirby could respond, the Frenchman stood up and turned towards the voices.

"I may be blind, sir, but I'm a very good doctor."

"I'm sorry, sir, I meant no offense." Saunders couldn't believe he had heard him.

"None taken, Sergeant."

"You speak very good English, Doctor." Saunders eyed the man closely.

"Thank you, Sergeant. I did my residency in the States. A place called Boston. Have you heard of it?" Dr. Robere smiled.

"Yeah, Doc." Saunders laughed. "I've heard of it."

"Now, Sergeant." Dr. Robere clutched his medical bag. "Your private tells me you have a medic with you."

"Yes, sir." Doc walked over and placed his hand on the physician's arm. "I'm right here."

"Good. Young man, if you're willing to be my eyes, I may be able to help. Just describe what you see. My other senses still work, so between the two of us we may be able to treat the young man's wound. Take me to him."

"OK, Doctor, he's over here." Doc led the man to Caje's side.

Dr. Robere began to run his hands over Caje's face and neck. He could feel the heat radiating off the Cajun and the sweat that rolled off his skin. He continued down both the scout's arms and across his chest, following the body line to the abdomen.

"Be careful, doctor, your getting close to his wound." Doc stopped the doctor's hands from roaming. "He's got a shrapnel fragment next to the main artery."

"He also has a pretty significant infection, young man," Dr. Robere stated.

"Yeah, I figured that, once his temp started going up."

"He is burning up with fever, but that isn't the only indication." Dr Robere turned towards Doc's voice. "I'm sorry, young man; I don't know your name."

"Oh, you can just call me Doc, everyone else does." Doc's smile came through in his voice.

"OK, Doc it is." Dr. Robere smiled back. "As I was saying, it is more than his rising temperature that indicates the infection."

"What else is there, sir?" Doc asked.

"The smell." Dr. Robere wrinkled his nose. "Do you not notice that pungent odor?"

Doc leaned over Caje slightly taking a deep breath, but could smell nothing.

"No, sir, I'm sorry I don't."

"That's OK, Doc. My senses have heightened since I lost my sight."

"May I ask how..."

"How I lost my sight?" Dr. Robere finished Doc's sentence. "When the war started the entire village made the decision that we would help and hide any allied soldiers. There was a pilot that crashed about 5 miles to the north. Two young villagers found him and brought him to me. He was severely injured and couldn't be moved. Two weeks later the Germans began their occupation. The pilot was found in my basement. It didn't take them long to find out who had found the pilot and brought him to the village. Those two young men were hung in the middle of the square. The pilot was shot right in front of me. I, on the other hand, had to be made an example of. They wanted the people to know the penalty for helping the enemy. So, because I was a physician, they figured the worst punishment they could give me was to take my sight. That way I had to live with the fact I could never practice my life's work again, and the villagers would always have a reminder."

Doc was sickened by the physician's story and glanced towards Sarge. He could tell by the stiff way Saunders was holding himself that he, too, had heard the man's story.

"I'm so sorry," Doc quietly replied.

"For what, young man, you have done nothing. Nothing but run those Boche animals out of my village." Hate dripped from every word. "For that, I thank you."

A low moan drew both men's attention back to the patient in front of them. Caje was becoming restless, and this was not a good sign.

"That shrapnel has to come out immediately. Sergeant?" Dr. Robere called out.

"Yes, Doctor."

"Private Kirby tells me there is an ambulance on the way?"

"Unfortunately, Doctor, there isn't." The doctor could hear the frustration in Saunders' voice. "Our Lieutenant says it's going to be awhile before they can send one."

Dr. Robere took a deep breath and held it for a moment before slowly releasing it.

"I'm sorry, Sergeant but your man doesn't have awhile to wait. If that shrapnel isn't removed soon, and I mean very soon, the infection will kill him." Dr. Robere wanted to stress the danger. "Also, he is becoming restless. If he moves too much he could displace that fragment. If that happens it could, and likely will, sever that artery. If that happens, he'll be dead in minutes."

"Can we keep him asleep with morphine?" Saunders asked.

"There's only so much morphine we can give without killing him, Sarge," Doc responded.

"What other choices do we have?" Saunders looked from Doc to Robere and back again.

Doc simply shook his head and looked at the floor. He knew they were out of options; he knew there was no hope for Caje if things didn't change drastically.

"We could operate," Robere said quietly.

"What!!" Doc was shocked at the suggestion.

"How?" Saunders was just as shocked. "I'm sorry, Doctor, but I just don't see how that is possible. I mean, Doc is a medic, not a doctor and you.... Well....."

"I know, Sergeant, I'm blind," Dr Robere responded sarcastically and then shook his head. "I'm sorry, Sergeant."

"No need to apologize, sir. I understand."

"Do you? Do you understand what it's like to lose the only thing that has ever meant anything to you? To know you have the skill to save a life, but can't do anything about it? Can you possibly understand that?" Robere responded angrily.

Saunders placed his hand on the doctor's shoulder and could feel him trembling. Robere took another deep breath to calm himself down.

"Again, I'm sorry, Sergeant."

A heart wrenching cry of pain from Caje stopped the conversation immediately. Doc grabbed his bag looking for more morphine as Dr. Robere and Saunders held the thrashing man down. The morphine was quickly injected, and soon Caje was once again asleep.

"Doctor, I think we have a problem," Doc called out.

"What is it?"

"He's bleeding badly again, and I can't get it stopped," Doc stated.

"It sounds like the shrapnel may have moved and nicked the artery," Robere thought out loud. "Sergeant, I don't think we have any other choice now. We operate or your man dies."

"But how, Doctor? You're in no position to operate and we have no other doctor here."

"No, Sergeant, no doctor but a perfectly capable medic." Robere stopped to let his statement sink in.



"Me? I'm no doctor. I can't operate. I'm a simple medic, I'm no doctor!"

The panic was welling up inside the young medic to the point he thought he would choke. He was feeling dizzy and figured he better sit down before he fell down. He sat heavily in the chair next to Caje and realized he was hyperventilating. *No wonder you're dizzy, you fool. Slow your breathing.*

"Doc, listen to me." Dr. Robere spoke quietly to the panicked man. He knew he had to calm the medic down before he could proceed. "I've told you before I lost my sight that I was a damn good doctor. What I didn't tell you was I was also a good teacher. You have but to be my eyes and my hands, and I will walk you through step by step. You will do fine."

"What if I don't, what if I make a mistake? I could kill him!" Doc looked from the aging physician to his sergeant.

Saunders saw his medic turn pale. He wondered how much more this man could take.

Turning towards Doc's voice, Dr. Robere reached out and placed his hand on the young medic's shoulder.

"Yes, Doc, you could possibly make a mistake and he could die. Even your doctors in your hospitals could make a mistake, and he could die. This is always a possibility, but I will tell you what is a definite." Doc looked up into the eyes of the aging doctor and saw sadness there. "If we don't operate very soon he will surely die. Do you not feel he deserves at least an attempt to save his life?"

Doc sighed deeply and lowered his head. "I just don't know." He whispered. "I just don't know."

"Doc, are you a religious man?" Robere asked softly.

"What?"

"Do you believe in God?"

"Yes," Doc answered absently. "Yes, of course I do."

"Then why don't you ask him?" Robere patted Doc's shoulder. "Ask him to guide your mind and your heart. Let him help you make this decision. Just don't take too long."

Dr. Robere knew how difficult this was going to be for the medic. He also knew that only one person could help him make the right choice.

Doc looked back up at Robere and nodded. Standing, he walked away from everyone, and then knelt in prayer.

Saunders watched Doc walk away and then stepped over to Dr. Robere. He helped the older man take a seat again and then crouched in front of him.

"Doctor, do you really feel it's wise to attempt something like this, here of all places?" Saunders was worried about both men, but more so about Doc's mental status. Especially if something went wrong.

"No, it is not wise, Sergeant. Under any other circumstances, I would never suggest it. However, I do not believe your soldier will make it through the night if we do not do something. Hell, we'll be lucky if he lasts another hour. I just don't see where we have much of a choice."

"OK, Doctor, we'll follow what you say. Tell me what you need us to do and we'll do it."

The doctor began giving instructions to the sergeant in preparation for the surgery. Over the next hour, the room became very busy. Those not on guard duties were busy with the doctor's instructions. Doc stayed in the corner of the room and prayed. He knew in his heart he had no choice. It was operate or watch Caje die. This was not an option Doc could choose. He was all Caje had.

God, please guide my hand. Please help me through the next few hours. Tears streamed down the medics face.

One of the back rooms was cleared of everything but a long table. Kirby and Littlejohn went for more water that could be boiled. While the instruments were sterilizing, the two soldiers scrubbed the table and everything around it. Saunders made a second trip to the doctor's home to retrieve bandages and ether. Dr. Robere sat with Caje, listening to his breathing and

assessing his fever. He knew they were running out of time. Finally everything was ready, everything but Doc. He continued to pray for guidance, and everyone else prayed he'd find it.

Slowly, Doc raised himself off the floor and turned towards the others.

"OK, let's do this." Doc's voice shook slightly.

Littlejohn and Kirby quickly undressed Caje and wrapped him in a blanket. Together they gently lifted him and carried him into the room that had been prepared. Doc followed behind them, his head hung down, silently praying. Saunders helped Dr. Robere up and into the room.

"We will need one other person, Sergeant, to help. I can administer the ether, but someone will need to monitor his vital signs, help Doc with the instruments and wipe away the blood."

"I'll stay," Saunders stated when he saw Littlejohn turn pale. "Kirby, you're in charge. Let me know the minute anything changes. We'll make our stand here, if it comes to that. Pull Jackson and Nelson back here at the first sign of trouble."

"Right, Sarge." Both soldiers were grateful to be leaving the room.

When Doc heard the door close behind him he felt sick. What in the world ever made him believe he could do this? He stood and stared at Caje lying motionless on the table. He couldn't make himself move.

"Doc?" He could barely hear his name, but he knew it was Sarge calling him. He felt a hand on his shoulder. "Doc, you're okay. We need to get started."

Doc closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He began to pray once again. *God, please guide my hand. Please don't let me hurt him.*

Doc opened his eyes to see Saunders staring at him with concern on his face.

"Okay, I'm ready." He turned to Dr. Robere. "What do I do?"

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The main room of the town hall was very quiet, but the tension could be cut with a knife. The rest of the squad either kept watch or checked and rechecked the weapons and supplies. They wanted to make sure everything was ready in case the German advance got too close. At least that is what they told themselves. In all actuality, they were doing everything they could to keep their minds off that back room.

Kirby paced back and forth. He felt like he would come out of his skin. *How long can it take, for God sakes?*

The tension was broken by Jackson bursting through the front door.

"Kirby, Littlejohn, we have a Kraut patrol heading for the village!"

"How long before they get here?" Kirby asked grabbing hold of his BAR.

"Maybe an hour, maybe less."

They could hear the fear creeping into Jackson's voice.

Kirby glanced over to the door of the back room and then turned to Littlejohn.

"We've got to keep them away from here until Doc gets a chance to finish." He was formulating a plan and he knew his sergeant would never agree. "Jackson, go get Billy back here. Littlejohn, you guys stay here and hold this place with all you're worth. I'm going to give the Krauts a welcome they'll never forget."



"You better tell Sarge, Kirby." Littlejohn also knew Saunders would never go for this.
"You can't just go without him knowing."

"Yes I can, Sarge put me in charge." Kirby could see Littlejohn was becoming very uncomfortable with his decision. "Don't say anything to him yet. What Sarge doesn't know won't hurt him, or me. Look, I'll take full responsibility for this. If you feel you have to tell Sarge just wait fifteen minutes. Then I'll already be set up and he can't do anything about it."

"Kirby..." Littlejohn began to protest, but Kirby's next statement stopped him cold.

"Do it for Doc and Caje. We have to buy them sometime and this is the best way to do it. Trust me Littlejohn. Have I ever steered you wrong before?"

Littlejohn rolled his eyes and turned away. He knew this man would probably not survive the day and even though they didn't usually get along, he felt he should say something more. He just didn't know what.

"Okay, Kirby," Littlejohn finally spoke very quietly. "I'll wait to tell Sarge if you're sure this is the way to go."

"I'm sure." Kirby raised his hand to place it on Littlejohn's shoulder and then thought better of it. He turned and called back as he left. "Hey, keep the coffee hot. I'll want some when I get back."

Littlejohn watched from the steps of the town hall as Kirby hung his BAR over his neck and headed for the north end of town.



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The operation was coming to a close. Everything had gone as well as could be expected. Dr. Robere guided Doc through every step. Sarge kept the area clear of blood, kept Doc's brow dry and watched Caje's vitals.

"Just a few more steps Doc, and we'll be done." Dr. Robere's voice helped keep Doc stay calm himself though he never stopped praying.

"Everything looks good so far, Doc." Saunders finished taking the blood pressure and felt Doc could use the reassurance.

Saunders thought he heard gunfire from outside the room. He stiffened and looked from Doc to Dr. Robere. He realized Doc was so focused on his task that he had heard nothing, but he could tell by Dr. Robere's body language that he had also heard it. Neither man wanted to break Doc's concentration so nothing was said.

The gunfire then got closer and Saunders was torn. He was needed out in the main room if there was going to be a firefight, but he couldn't leave when Doc needed him most.

Dr. Robere sensed why Saunders was uncomfortable.

"Sergeant." Robere's quiet voice broke into Saunders' thoughts. "I think we are far enough along that we can do without you now. We have but to close."

Saunders looked at the aged doctor in surprise. Was it possible that this man knew what he was thinking and feeling? Doc's tension filled voice broke his train of thought this time.

"He can't leave yet. We're not finished yet. What about Caje's blood pressure, who will take that?" Doc began hearing the gunfire in the distance. "Oh my God, gunfire." He whispered.

"Yes, Doc, gunfire. Your sergeant is needed elsewhere. You will be fine. We are almost done. God will guide you the rest of the way. Trust him."

Dr. Robere's confidence in Doc was apparent in his voice. Doc calmed down and looked at his sergeant.

"Go, Sarge, I'm okay. They need you out there."

Saunders locked eyes with his medic. He now knew Doc would be okay and began to feel more comfortable with leaving. He nodded to Doc, picked up his Thompson and left the room.

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When Saunders entered the main room he came face to face with Littlejohn. The big man was heading for the back room and the sudden appearance of his sergeant startled him.

"Hey, Sarge." Littlejohn stammered. "Is it over already?"

"Almost, Doc is doing fine. So is Caje." He looked around the room and realized Kirby was missing. "Where's Kirby?"

Littlejohn suddenly became very interested in the toe of his shoe as he kicked his foot and stuttered his response.

"Well, Sarge, uh, that's what I was coming to tell you. See, uh, Kirby thought Doc needed more time to finish." Littlejohn glanced up at his sergeant but couldn't keep eye contact, so he quickly looked back at his shoes. "Well, uh, you see...."

"Spit it out, Littlejohn." Saunders had anger in his voice, but concern in his eyes. "Where the Hell is Kirby?"

As he finished his statement more gunfire erupted at the north end of town. Littlejohn quickly looked up and locked eyes with his sergeant and Saunders knew.

"He told us to stay here and protect the Town hall. He said he was just going to buy Doc some time."

"Damn him!" Saunders grumbled under his breath. "Doc is almost finished. When he's done, see if Caje can be moved to the doctor's house. If he can, get him moved and leave Doc and Dr. Robere with him. Then get back here and dig in. Maybe Kirby and I can hold them at the edge of town. If we can't, it will fall on you. Hold this place as long as you can. If we have any luck on our side, reinforcements will get here before it gets that far."

Saunders headed for the door, when Littlejohn grabbed his arm and stopped him.

"Sarge, I tried to stop him. I told him you wouldn't have allowed it." He looked at his shoes again. "I guess he felt he had to do something to help and well, this was it. Sarge, let me go. I'll bring him back."

"No, Littlejohn, I need you here. I'll bring him back."

Saunders knew this was probably not going to be possible, but knew he had to try.

*** *** ***

Saunders followed the sound of gunfire, taking cover behind the rubble in the street. Reaching the north end of town he could see Kirby lying on his left side, leaning against a wall that had crumbled in the shelling; he had good cover, but Saunders knew he couldn't last long. The BAR went suddenly silent and Saunders watched Kirby eject a magazine and slap in a new one. He could also see that every time Kirby had to stop to reload, the Germans would move up a few more feet.

Saunders bolted forward and dived behind the wall a few feet from Kirby. He landed hard and had to catch his breath. Saunders let out a yell to get Kirby's attention.

"What the Hell were you thinking, Kirby? Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

Kirby barely turned to see his sergeant lying a few feet from him. He never stopped firing.

"Oh, hi ya, Sarge. Come to join the party?" Kirby shouted above the roar of the BAR.

"I asked you a question." Saunders continued as he crawled towards his private.

When he reached Kirby's side, Saunders' hand landed in something wet and sticky.

Raising his hand, he realized it was covered in blood. He looked at the ground by his knee. A fairly good sized pool of blood lay amongst the rubble. His gaze followed the red stream. "Kirby, you're hit." Saunders shouted, noticing for the first time how pale and sweaty Kirby was.

"Yeah, you noticed." Kirby answered dryly.

"Where are you hit and how bad is it?"

"It's my hip, Sarge. Don't worry about it. I think the Krauts will take care of it for me." Kirby nodded towards the forces moving up again.

"We need to stop the bleeding. At the rate you're losing blood you're going to lose consciousness soon. Then you won't be any good to anyone."

Saunders tried to move him again, but Kirby wouldn't budge.

"I already tried, Sarge. It didn't do any good. Let's just worry about buying Doc and Caje more time. I probably won't survive this anyway."

Saunders grabbed Kirby's shoulder and turned him over. "I don't want to hear that soldier. We're both getting out of this. Now let me see that wound."



Kirby turned away from his sergeant and began to fire his weapon again. He had to keep them away from the Town Hall. He knew it would mean his life, but he had to give Doc more time. He could feel the darkness creeping into his mind and he fought it back. *Not now. Have to give Doc time. Not now.*

He fought to stay conscious but was losing the battle. He found it hard to hold the heavy BAR up to fire. He could hear Sarge's Tommy gun firing behind him.

The darkness was descending quickly; he felt dizzy and could barely lift his head. It seemed as if all the sounds around him were coming from a M-1 being fired from behind them, but that was

great distance away. He thought he heard an M-1 being fired from behind them, but that was impossible. He made one final attempt to raise his weapon again before the darkness won out and he slumped against the crumbled wall.

Saunders continued to fire, trying to stop the German advance. He could hear Kirby firing, but the rounds were coming slower and there were pauses in his firing. He knew Kirby was losing consciousness; he had to stop the bleeding.

From behind their position he could hear an M-1 firing. He saw the two Germans out front fall. The Germans stopped advancing and took cover. Saunders looked to see Nelson and Jackson advancing towards their position. Between the three soldiers, they had taken out the German patrol in short order.

Saunders saw Kirby unconscious and slumped against the wall. Turning him on his back, he quickly removed the hastily applied bandage that the soldier had put on that was now soaked with blood. Pulling a fresh dressing from his web belt, he began applying pressure to Kirby's hip. Nelson and Jackson joined him at the wall.

"What the Hell are you two doing here? I told you to stay back at the Town hall." Saunders was grateful they were there, but angry they had disobeyed his orders.

"No you didn't, Sarge."

Saunders angrily looked up into the smiling face of young Billy Nelson.

"You told Littlejohn to stay at the Town hall. You didn't say anything about us."

Saunders was speechless for a moment. Then he had to grin at the young soldier. "Aren't you splitting hairs, Nelson?"

"No." Nelson replied, and then noticed his injured squad mate. "He okay, Sarge?"

"He's lost a lot of blood. We need to get him back to Doc." Saunders realized he hadn't thought of Doc since leaving. He continued dressing Kirby's wound while he questioned Billy. "Did Doc finish the surgery? Did everything go alright?"

"Yeah, Sarge, he finished just as we left. He said Caje was doing well. Kirby bought them enough time."

Saunders nodded at Nelson's last statement. He finished dressing Kirby's wound, stood and slung his Thompson over his shoulder. "Let's get him back."

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He thought he could hear voices in the back of his mind as he started rising out of the darkness. The smell of antiseptic and blood mingled in his nostrils, making him nauseous. He slowly opened his eyes and realized he was in the first aid tent. How did he get there? He couldn't remember being injured. Then the memories flooded back. He remembered the church, Conley heading for the door, calling after him to stop, the explosion, the debris raining down on top of him. Conley, oh God, Conley was gone, wasn't he?

Caje looked around, wanting to ask someone about the rest of the squad when he saw Doc asleep in a chair by his cot.

"Doc." His voice was raspy and not much more than a whisper from lack of use. His throat was dry and he wished he had some water.

"Doc." He spoke a little louder this time and he saw Doc startle awake.

"Caje, you with us? How are you feeling?"

The excitement in Doc's voice puzzled Caje. He tried to answer but his voice wouldn't cooperate. He tried to clear his throat but it was too dry.

"Here, let me get you some water." Doc grabbed a glass of water and helped Caje lift his head to take a drink. Caje drank greedily until it made him cough.

"Slow down, Caje, just a little at a time." Doc took the glass away and then gave the injured man several smaller sips. When Caje had his fill, Doc helped him lay his head back on the pillow and then retook his seat beside the cot.

"Doc, what happened?" Caje's voice was a little clearer now that his throat wasn't so dry.

"What do you remember, Caje?" Doc wasn't sure where to start.

"Sarge sent me and Conley to check out the church. Conley started to go inside and I hollered at him to stop because we hadn't checked it out yet." Caje closed his eyes against the memory, then slowly opened them and looked at Doc. "He wouldn't listen, Doc, he just kept going in the door. The last thing I remember is the whole place blew. Conley's gone, ain't he Doc?"

"Yeah, Caje, I'm afraid he is, and we came awful close to losing you too."

"And we would have if it hadn't been for Doc." Doc and Caje looked up to see up to see Saunders standing at the foot of the cot.

"Not me, Sarge." Doc immediately cut in. "It was Dr. Robere that saved Caje, not me."

"Wait." Caje was becoming confused, he felt like the room was spinning. "What are you talking about? Who is Dr. Robere?"

Saunders smiled and chuckled a little as he sat on the side of the cot.

"Dr. Robere was an old doctor we found in the village. Problem was he was blind."



"Blind?" Caje started to sit up, but the pain caused from his movement made him change his mind. "If he was blind, how could he have helped me?"

"Well, you see, Caje." Saunders looked towards Doc, who was looking down at his feet, his face blushing. "The doctor said you needed surgery right away and we couldn't get you to the aid station because we had been cut off by a German advance."

Caje's shocked expression amused Saunders that much more as he continued the story.

"The doctor said to wait would cost you your life." Saunders glanced over at Doc who continued to look at the floor. "So Doc here had to operate."

"Operate!" This time Caje did sit up in total surprise. He wished he hadn't when a wave a nausea and the searing pain hit. "How could Doc operate?"

Both Doc and Saunders were at Caje's side immediately helping him lie back down.

"Lay down, Caje, you shouldn't be moving like that." Worry for Caje now replaced the embarrassment Doc felt before. "Dr. Robere talked me through the procedure step by step. If it hadn't been for him, I couldn't have done anything." Doc and Saunders both sat back down. "Besides, if Kirby hadn't kept that German patrol busy, I couldn't have completed the operation. He's the real hero."

Caje's head was spinning even more with confusion. "German patrol? Kirby held off a German patrol alone? How? Is he alright?"

"Kirby's fine." Saunders patted the scout's leg in reassurance. "He's three cots down from you. He took one in the hip, but he held his ground. He needed to buy Doc some time, so he took off alone to keep the patrol at the edge of town. By the time I found out and got to him, he had been wounded, but was still fighting."

Caje shook his head. He couldn't imagine all this happening and him not knowing it. What was even more amazing to him was how Doc managed to operate on him.

"Doc," Caje began reluctantly at first. "Tell me one thing."

"What's that, Caje?"

"How? How did you find it in you to do something like that?" Caje looked into Doc's eyes and saw a strength there he hadn't seen before.

"You know, Caje, at first I didn't think I could. I was scared to death that if I tried, I would end up killing you." Doc straightened up in his chair, his confidence restored and intact. "There is only one thing in this world that has the power to help someone do something like this."

"What's that, Doc?" Saunders asked as he too wondered how Doc got through this.

Doc looked from Saunders to Caje.

"What is it, Sarge?" Doc smiled widely. "It's the power of prayer, Sarge, the power of prayer."



THE END