

WHEN THE SMOKE CLEARS

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The smoke surrounded him, filling his senses. A weak light vaguely filtered through the thick haze, but it was too dim to illuminate beyond shadows. A constant roar assaulted his ears; its tempo never varied. He was drowning, he was suffocating, but he wasn't dying. Death was silent and black. Death came quickly as a surprise.

Surprise--Scott's face had been full of surprise. Wonder and absolute shock had frozen his features. His eyes appeared in the fog, wide, staring, accusing. The eyes that had once twinkled and crinkled at a joke were now gazing horribly back at his friend--and murderer.

"Did you see his face?"

"Littlejohn, wake up!" The anxious voice of Billy Nelson couldn't penetrate the dream his friend was trapped in.

"Did you see his eyes?" Littlejohn moaned and tossed on his bedroll.

"C'mon Littlejohn!" Billy grabbed the larger man's arm, shaking and pulling it hard. "It's a nightmare, wake up!"

The insistent drum solo Billy was performing on his arm pulled Littlejohn out of his dream. He stared ahead for an instant, not comprehending the difference between wake and sleep. With a twist of his head he glanced to his side, looking for the bedroll and figure of Scott. But Scott's phantom face faded and was replaced with young Nelson's wide, scared eyes.

"Hey, you didn't want to wake up," Billy tried to cover his worry with bluster. "Are you okay?"

"Scott's dead," Littlejohn whispered as the last wisp of the dream world slipped away.

"Littlejohn, that was two weeks ago!" Billy blurted.

Nelson's worry was well served. Ever since the accident at the bridgehead, Littlejohn had sunk deeper and deeper into a horrid world of self incrimination, punishment, and blame. The night held no solace and his plagued sleep became filled with the recurring delusion. After his release from the hospital, Littlejohn chastised himself for his fatal blunder and finger slip by withdrawing from the squad's camaraderie. Billy barely heard a civil word from his friend. Kirby and Cajé each took turns in attempting to reach through Littlejohn's barriers but had no luck. Doc kept close watch over the guilt-ridden man while Saunders silently stood back. The sergeant knew Littlejohn was trapped in a deep depression, but until the private realized his need for help, there was nothing Saunders could do.

"C'mon Littlejohn, Sarge told us to get up. There's hot chow at the mess tent." Billy tried enticement, but the tactic barely worked.

Now faced with stark reality instead of haunting reverie, Littlejohn forced his heavy hands to fold and pack his gear. Though both options were available, he neglected to shave and passed by a change of clean clothes. Merely lifting his feet appeared to require more effort than facing a division of Germans, and he took no note of the walk to the mess tent. At an earlier time, the warm, edible food would have made Littlejohn happy for the entire day. Now he could hardly swallow a few tasteless mouthfuls.

During chow, Billy tried to get a reaction from Littlejohn by keeping a steady stream of chatter flowing. Littlejohn paid no attention until a phrase triggered his memory.

"I need to finish my letter to home and tell dad to buy some real estate for me." Billy smiled wistfully, "It would be nice to have something of my own to come back to..."

Real estate. Scott and Kirby had been joking about starting a top soil business, but there had been confusion over what consisted of a yard of dirt. Clearly Scott had been deadpanning, but at the time Kirby seemed optimistic. Scott was always like that, always making the guys laugh. But now Scott was dead. He was dead because Littlejohn killed him.

"I killed him." With his own thoughts reverberating in his head, Littlejohn noticed his squad mates were lining up for their next assignment. Nonetheless he knew there would be no escape from the constant assault on his consciousness. *"I killed him, I killed him."*



Someone was outlining the day's orders yet Littlejohn didn't hear the words. A tug on his sleeve from Billy alerted Littlejohn it was time to move along with the squad. Holding his rifle carelessly in one hand, he plodded down the road keeping his eyes glued to Billy's back. When Littlejohn stumbled over his own two feet, a worried Billy glanced back at his friend so often he almost tripped himself.

Eventually, they reached a small village and halted. To his surprise, Littlejohn realized Lieutenant Hanley was in charge of the patrol, and he was giving everyone their assignments. While ordinarily insignificant, the village before them needed to be cleared so a command post could be established. The lieutenant quickly divided the men into groups: Saunders, Littlejohn and Doc started west, Caje and Kirby went east, and Billy and Sawyer bisected the center with Banks and Hanley.

While Saunders took the right side of the street, Doc followed Littlejohn along the left. Doc waited until the sergeant disappeared into a building out of ear shot before asking Littlejohn how he was doing. Only replying with a monosyllable "Fine", Littlejohn moved forward and pushed through the first door he arrived at. The next three houses were given a routine glance, though Doc wasn't sure if Littlejohn was actually seeing what was before him. Finally the medic decided he had try harder and say something, anything that would allow Littlejohn to talk about what was bothering him.

Doc made his decision while they were in a tailor shop. After Littlejohn poked around the counter and back room in listless fashion, he turned to leave but found Doc was blocking the way to the door. Bluntly, the medic questioned, "Littlejohn, what's wrong?"

The private refused to meet the medic's eyes, fixing his gaze upon the worn stock of his rifle. "Nothing's wrong."

Doc sighed. It wasn't his way to pound information out of people, but he felt frustrated that he couldn't reach his friend. "Something is, Littlejohn, and it's eating at you. You're not yourself and if I can do anything to help, please let me know."

A long, stagnate moment passed in which neither man spoke. Littlejohn's expression didn't vary, and Doc wasn't sure if his words had gotten through. There was no point staying here listening to the silence, so he turned to go through the door.

"You can't fix it now!" Littlejohn's explosion of words halted the Doc's stride, "Back when it happened, I wanted to talk about it. I needed to make someone understand what I had done. I *killed* Scott. Sarge told me to forget it. The Lieutenant told me the Krauts killed him. You," Littlejohn emphasized the pronoun, "You told me we'd talk about it later. Well, later has come and gone."

Stunned, Doc stared at the man before him. He had no idea of the guilt and rage Littlejohn had kept bottled up inside until it had erupted around him. Now Doc was aware of his own failing. He never should have tried to sweep that horrible day under the carpet of his memory. He should have been there for his friend.

"You're right, Littlejohn." Doc lifted his hands helplessly. "I should have helped you before. I'm sorry I didn't. But please let me try now, it's not too late."

But the floodgate was securely shut again, and Littlejohn reestablished his expressionless veneer. "Sorry I yelled. I just need some time."

Incredulous, Doc shook his head. "Littlejohn, you don't have time. That's the one thing you don't have out here."

Shrugging his massive shoulders, Littlejohn swallowed whatever words he might have said and stood quiet. Again, Doc found himself against a stone wall of silence, and his only option was to continue the mission for now. Shoulders slumped in defeat, he stepped out into the crisp sunshine and summer air. He didn't see the loose board on the threshold and, stubbing his foot, Doc stumbled forward. The lurching movement saved his life.

A lone shot erupted and then the air was full of lead that sprayed the wooden building and shattered glass. The bullet aimed for Doc's chest instead smashed into his outstretched arm as the medic fell. Falling off the board sidewalk and landing heavily on the street, Doc lay dazed. Littlejohn ducked behind the door frame and answered the Germans with a few hasty shots.

"Doc, are you alright?" Littlejohn shouted, momentarily thrown out of his funk.

When Doc attempted to answer all he could do was wheeze. After gasping in a few painful breaths, he managed to choke out a few words. "I'm fine."

"Can you move?"

A groan was Doc's only reply, but then Littlejohn felt the sidewalk shudder beneath him. Glancing down through a crack in the boards, he saw the medic's form. Apparently, there had been a wide enough

opening between the street and the sidewalk for Doc to roll underneath. He was out of the field of fire, for now.

The familiar staccato bursts of Thompson machine gun fire caught Littlejohn's attention, and he saw smoke drifting out of the window across the street. Though he couldn't see the Sarge, Littlejohn knew he was there. All was quiet for a moment, but when Saunders dared to peek from behind the wall, he was forced down when another German position opened fire.

With a chill, Littlejohn realized the German who was firing at Saunders was in the upper story of the buildings Littlejohn had supposedly cleared. The shot that struck Doc came from further down the street within a solid building. The Germans had effectively pinned the Americans down.

Years ago, the narrow street had run all the way through the town. However, an enterprising businessman decided to build his hotel and restaurant directly in the middle of the road, thus directing customers and travelers to his establishment and cutting off the path to his competition. While a smart business move, the street was now a manmade box canyon. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the Germans were holed up in the hotel and commanded a good view of street before them.

Knowing he couldn't go forward without being cut down, Littlejohn took a gamble that he would be able to sneak out the back door and cut around the building to gain a better position to attack the hotel. Whispering to Doc what his plans were, Littlejohn left the tailor shop. The past weeks of worry and blame melted away as the will to survive and save his friend took a strong hold. Moving quietly and staying in the shadows, Littlejohn passed two buildings and then struck gold. A narrow alleyway opened between the two structures and ended next to the hotel.

Traveling the length of the short alley, Littlejohn paused before making his next move. Saunders and the upper-story sniper still had each other pinned down and were trading shots back and forth. But the thing that spurred Littlejohn into action was the fact that someone in the hotel was now firing around Doc's position under the boardwalk. Bullets were ricocheting off the street and splintering the wood around the hidden medic.

It was now or never. Littlejohn dropped to his belly and wormed his way toward the hotel windows. The shots were coming from the top floor, and if he could just get close enough, he would be able to swing the battle into his favor before the rest of the squad arrived. Gaining his destination, Littlejohn paused and pulled a grenade from his pocket. It wasn't until he had pulled the pin that his eyes glanced down at the weapon in his hand. The memory hit him like an express train.

The bridge.

The grenade.

Scott's eyes.

The explosion.

Time seemed to stand still and the battle warped away from him as if pulled into a soundproof room far, far away. He could not move. Frozen still, the grenade sat in his hand, taunting him, daring him to let go of the handle and everything else. He felt as if history was repeating itself. In order to throw the grenade, he'd have to break cover and expose himself to the Germans' rifles. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a body lying huddled on the ground. Blood poured from numerous gashes and holes, and then suddenly the apparition raised its head. Scott's mutilated death mask of a face stared at Littlejohn.

"Go ahead, drop it. Nobody will care if you mess up again."

If Littlejohn could have opened his hands, he would have let go of the grenade and ended everything right there. Instead, he squeezed his eyes shut, but Scott's taunting words remained with him.

Events flew past him without notice. Lieutenant Hanley arrived with reinforcements and the Germans last stand was hot and heavy. Saunders finally silenced his adversary across the street. The added firepower of Hanley's squad poured into the upper story of the hotel above Littlejohn's head. Still deaf to all outside noises, Littlejohn didn't hear two pairs of boots pound down the back stairs.



Eventually, the barriers faded and Littlejohn was aware someone was talking to him. Slowly his eyes opened, and he saw Billy standing beside him rapidly spitting out questions.

"Littlejohn, what are you doing?" Nelson's eyes grew wide when he saw the grenade locked in Littlejohn's hand. "Where's the pin?"

"What?" The visions of Scott waned, and Littlejohn tried to focus his glazed eyes on Billy.

"The pin, Littlejohn! Where's the freaking pin?" Billy desperately tried to maintain control of his apprehension.

Suddenly, Littlejohn noticed the object he held in his hand. He panicked, "Billy, get it out, get it out of my hand!"

"Easy, Littlejohn, easy," Billy dropped his rifle and wrapped both of his hands around Littlejohn's trembling grip. "Relax! It's okay, I've got it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, you can let go. I've got it." Billy put unfelt certainty into his statement, but he had to make Littlejohn believe his bravado was real.

Littlejohn's sweat-filled hands slowly slipped from the pineapple explosive, and Billy's equally damp palms kept the pressure on the handle. Aside from moving his hands, Littlejohn remained glued in his position. Barely trusting himself to blink, Billy slowly pulled away from his friend. A glint of metal caught his eye and with baited breath, Billy reached for the cotter pin on the ground.

Sliding the pin home, Billy finally breathed. Another cautionary check insured him that the grenade was indeed neutralized. Pushing it deep into his pocket, Billy picked his rifle up and put a hand on Littlejohn's arm.

"C'mon, Littlejohn, stand up. It's okay now."

"Scott was there Billy." Staring into the distance, Littlejohn's tone was low and monotonous. "He was laughing at me."

"You're okay Littlejohn, just stand up. Everything is okay." Billy kept repeating the words and was still helping his friend to his feet when Saunders arrived.

"Littlejohn, are you alright?" The sergeant was justly concerned from one look at Littlejohn's ashen face.

When he didn't receive an answer, the Sarge's eyes flickered over to Billy. The young private shortly replied, "Grenade."

Saunders' mouth tightened but he didn't say a word. Taking Littlejohn's other arm, he and Billy held the catatonic man upright.

Together, the threesome walked down the street to where Caje and Kirby were easing Doc out from under the boardwalk. Lieutenant Hanley had received the final report from the other privates whom he had sent to clear the surrounding buildings.

"There's a dead Kraut upstairs, but the couple that were in the hotel skipped town through a backdoor," Sawyer reported.

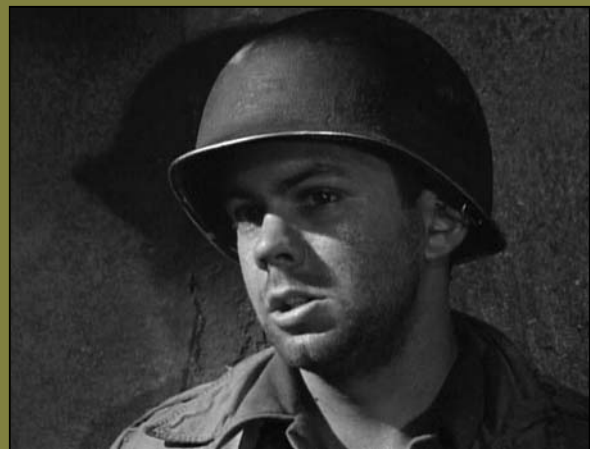
"Alright, Caje, Banks and Sawyer fan out and keep a sharp eye. Kirby, you, too." Hanley gave his orders. "Nelson, stay here."

Sergeant Saunders relieved Kirby and completed wrapping the bandage around Doc's wounded arm. "Looks okay, but we better get you back to the hospital."

"It don't hurt much," Doc said through gritted teeth. He gratefully took a sip of water from Saunders' offered canteen. Doc looked over at the other soldiers, and Saunders could plainly read the medic's concern for Littlejohn.

"Nelson, what happened?" Hanley could see he wouldn't get any kind of an answer from Littlejohn at the moment. In the aftermath of the skirmish, Hanley was too far away to see what had taken Billy so long to retrieve Littlejohn, but now the officer wanted answers.

Placed under the proverbial spotlight, Billy blinked and swallowed hard. He could feel the sweat begin to dry on his face and Littlejohn's hollow, haunted gaze was rather unnerving. Nevertheless, he



knew he couldn't betray Littlejohn's nightmares to the lieutenant. Billy decided to stick with the bare facts. "Um, just replaced a cotter pin on a grenade, sir. That was all."

"That was all?" Hanley didn't need to speak loudly, but his tone inferred plenty.

"Yes sir." Billy flushed, but met Hanley's gaze squarely. Littlejohn had stood up and covered for him many a time and now Billy had a chance to return the favor. "I guess Littlejohn was ready to throw the grenade but when you guys came there wasn't any need. No sense in letting any other Germans know we were here with a big explosion."

"No doubt they thought our rifle fire was a passing thunderstorm." Hanley's delivery was loaded with unconcealed sarcasm.

"Sir," Billy had a sinking feeling that he was trapped and couldn't decide whether to answer yes or no. He stayed silent.

"I froze." Littlejohn spoke in such a low tone the others almost didn't hear him.

"What?" Hanley said.

"I froze, sir." Littlejohn raised his pain filled eyes. "Just like what happened at the bridgehead."

"That's enough," Saunders stepped in with a voice that could slice through granite. "Littlejohn, the bridgehead is over. Scott is gone. You need to pull yourself out of the hole you're wallowing in, and do it now."

"I'm sorry," was the only reply Littlejohn gave.

Before anything else could be said, Doc shifted his position and then groaned. He reached over and cradled his wounded arm. Accomplishing his objective in pulling the attention off Littlejohn for a moment, Doc shrugged an apology.

"Sorry."

"Nelson, join the others." Hanley sent Billy off, though the young private went slowly and looked back a couple times. Catching Saunders' unspoken question, the lieutenant gave a faint nod.

With a frustrated sigh, the Sarge tipped his helmet back for a brief moment and gathered his thoughts. "Littlejohn, we can't keep babying you along. You have to be willing to help yourself, otherwise you will never make it. I can only do so much."

Littlejohn barely responded with a nod. A loaded, silent moment passed before Hanley gave the final decree to the private.

"Littlejohn, take Doc back to the hospital, and check yourself in for a full psychiatric analysis. I don't want to do this, but I have to."

"I'll go with them," Saunders said.

"No, I need every available man here. The Germans know we're here, and they'll be back."

"We'll be fine," Doc said, and he gamely tried to stand on his own. However with the change in elevation his blood pressure dropped, and he was grateful for Saunders' steadying hand.

With nothing to say in reply to his commanding officer, Littlejohn merely nodded and started to plod down the road.

"Watch him, Doc, as best you can. And take care of yourself," Hanley cautioned.

"It's just a flesh wound, sir. I'll be okay. But Littlejohn--his wound goes much deeper."

"I know," Hanley nodded, and Doc walked away. Littlejohn had paused so Doc could catch up, and then the two walked down the road away from the town.

"Let's get back to our mission," Hanley told Saunders, and the two rejoined their squads. If the sergeant couldn't get through to Littlejohn, then hopefully the doctors at the hospital would find a way. Hanley truly hated to send Littlejohn to the shrinks, but now was not the time to second guess his decision. Orders had to be given and events moved ahead.



"They're coming,"

"I see them."

"They're getting closer, what should we do?"

"Be quiet, Erich."

"But..."

"I said, be quiet, Erich!"

The rebuke from his companion hushed Erich momentarily. Corporal Kurt von Ruhr turned back to the window and immediately muttered a soft curse.

"What's wrong?" Erich wished he could eat the words to keep them silent, but they bubbled over his lips and rang out in the still air.

"I lost sight of the Americans. Now shut up!"

"Sorry."

A grunt was all that came from Kurt. Erich couldn't tell if he was angry or not, but Erich was ashamed he had bothered the older soldier in the first place. He felt helpless and useless and wished he had learned to control his nervous talking when he was frightened.

But soldiers of the glorious Third Reich were supposed to be impervious to fear. That was what his drill instructor said, though the man had not bothered to explain the word impervious. Even the Hitler Youth had not prepared him for his duty as a soldier. Erich had secretly hated the institution and wished he had been left alone to help his father in the dry goods store. Ever since the shop run by the Goldberg's suddenly closed and the family mysteriously disappeared, his father's business had tripled, and there was none but Erich to help stock, clean and sell.

Erich looked back at the street below, and his heart skipped a beat and then tried to triple hammer its way out of his chest. "Kurt! There's another on the other side! With a camo helmet!"

"I know!" Kurt hissed back. "But Hans has that side of the street." He referred to the building down and across the street from the hotel where he and Erich were stationed. "We are to cover the right, where the two Americans were a minute ago."

"But you don't know where they are? Where can they be?"

"Stop panicking!" Kurt again took his eyes from the street below and glared at his companion. "If you don't shut up right now I'll shoot you myself!"

Kurt's threat cut straight through Erich's terror, and he clamped his trembling lips shut. While only slightly older than Erich's nineteen years, Kurt was a seasoned veteran and Erich wasn't sure if he would actually carry out his warning. Deciding he shouldn't push Kurt to the limit, Erich looked back out the window, fearful to see how much closer the Americans were. A hint of movement on the street below brushed by his vision, and he zeroed his Mauser in to the disturbance. Something was right behind the door of the tailor shop.

Suddenly another wave of panic swept over Erich, engulfing him from the top of his head to the tip of his toes. "I see them!" he cried out as he swept his rifle toward the movement and squeezed the trigger.

While his finger continuing to jerk the trigger with sporadic motion, Erich saw the American lurch off the sidewalk. As the man fell, Erich was stunned to see a brightly marked brassard on the sleeve of the man's outstretched arm. The international symbol glared back at him, a red cross on a white field. Trying to make the horrible mistake disappear, Erich squeezed his eyes shut in agony.

Dimly, Erich heard Kurt cursing and firing his rifle at the surprised Americans. Across the street, Hans also joined in the ambush volley. Insensible of the pitched battle crashing around his ears, Erich could only think of the man he had just shot. The dreadful scene replayed itself in his mind over and over and over again. He couldn't turn it off or stop it.

Trapped in the never-ending cycle of memory, Erich barely felt the tugging on his shirt sleeve. "They have reinforcements!" Kurt shouted in Erich's ear as he yanked the young man to his feet. "Out the back, now!"

"Hans?" Erich questioned, as he let Kurt shove him toward the back staircase.

"Dead, now move!" and with that, Kurt thrust Erich down the stairs and hurried after him. At the bottom of the staircase, Kurt pushed past Erich to take a look around. Briefly ensuring the Americans hadn't flanked them, Kurt grabbed Erich's arm and started to run away from the desolate village.



Without uttering a word, Littlejohn and Doc trudged forward for some time. The day was hot, and Doc knew he'd be drenched with sweat soon. Cradling his wounded arm, Doc finally called for a brief break as they were passing a clump of small trees.

"Just gotta catch my wind for a minute," Doc sighed, as he sank to the ground and leaned against the tree trunk.

"Am I going too fast?" Littlejohn raised his head as he remembered his friend's condition.

"Naw, you're alright. Just getting hot out here, that's all." Doc didn't have any trouble keeping up with the longer legged man. Littlejohn shambled along the entire way as if he didn't feel the need to quicken the plodding pace. Doc had out-distanced him for a while until he started to feel the combined effects of weather and wound.

"Okay," Littlejohn's head dropped, and he made an intense study of his boots.

Doc gave an inward sigh and rallied his mental forces for another attempt to reach through Littlejohn's impenetrable defenses. "Littlejohn, you know you're in for a lot of trouble when we get back to the hospital. Psych evaluation is nothing to fool with."

"What's the worse they could do? Send me home?" Littlejohn looked up, and the pain that flooded his eyes was startling. "That actually is the worse they could do. I can't do anything at home. I'll spend every day knowing that I'm back because my mistake cost Scott everything."

"You can't keep beating yourself up about this, Littlejohn!"

"What else can I do?" The private blinked his eyes and a tear twisted a salty path down his weathered cheek.

"Live!" Doc put every ounce of faith, trust, and vehement belief into that one word.

"I can't," the whispered reply was almost lost in the slight breeze.

"Littlejohn, you have a chance to save yourself. You can't go back in the past and change what happened. But you can change the future, and I know Scott wouldn't want to see you like this. Please."

Instead of replying, Littlejohn stood. Turning his face, he looked without seeing at the road they were traveling on. "We'd better go now."

Doc stood as well. He knew he had lost this battle, but he feared his friend would capitulate the war entirely. There was a slim chance the fight might be won, but only if Doc could reach Littlejohn before returning to camp. He knew time was on the enemy's side.



It wasn't until the pair had reached the safety of the small farmhouse that Erich spoke. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?" Kurt whirled around and grabbed Erich by his collar. He bodily lifted the smaller man off the ground and smashed him into the wall. The whole house shuddered. "You idiot! You can't sit still, you can't follow orders! As far as I'm concerned, you killed Hans as easily if you had shot him point blank."

"Hans?" Erich was confused, and Kurt's steel grip was cutting off his air supply.

"Of course Hans is dead! Do you think he stood a chance against the Americans without us?" Kurt's voice shook with rage.

A few seconds passed, and the red anger before Kurt's eyes faded and seemed to find a new home in Erich's ochre, expressionless face. Loosening his grip and letting the numb boy fall to the ground, Kurt stepped away. "Why do I even bother," he muttered and turned to the glassless window.

With a great breath that suddenly developed into an extended, hacking cough, Erich lay limply on the ground and didn't look up. Now along with the falling figure of the medic he had shot, Erich could plainly see the form of Hans. His imagination painted bullet holes and gore over both bodies until he shook with the waking nightmare of his mistakes.

"Get a drink of water, it will help your throat," Kurt's rough voice cut through Erich's dreams, and a capped water bag landed on his neck.

Slowly retrieving the canteen, Erich gulped the tepid liquid in an effort to drown his shame. He knew Kurt's last words and action were as close an apology for the throttling as the corporal would own

up to, but they in no way diminished the crimes he, Erich Houffman, had committed against his fellow soldiers and humanity.



For another hour, the two walked under the relentless sun. Doc wondered how his feet could feel so heavy when he was certain he had sweated several pounds away. Maybe it was the boots. Did the Army put lead in them? Maybe his socks were too tight. Maybe, just maybe he had filled his boots with cement before leaving that morning. The sweat had mixed with the cement dust, and now the heat was causing...Doc suddenly stopped and shook his head. He knew the loss of blood coupled with a fever and a hot summer day was bad for his imagination, but if he didn't take a break soon, he'd continue hallucinating he was a cement mixer or something worse.

"Littlejohn," he had to work his dry tongue around his equally parched mouth before continuing, "I need a break."

His companion turned around and suddenly was concerned. "Here Doc, sit down! You're all white." He passed his canteen to his friend, and Doc greedily snagged the metal can.

"Thanks," Doc handed the canteen back, "make sure you stay hydrated too." Sitting down and drinking the water helped tremendously, though he still felt light-headed.

"Let's find a place where's there some shade." Littlejohn scanned down the treeless road that wound through open meadows. At high noon, even the hedgerows and stone fences offered scant solace. "Hey, that farm house we went by this morning is up ahead, think you can make it?"

Squinting against the glare of the sun, Doc spotted the modest building. "Sure."

Helping his friend to his feet, Littlejohn kept a firm hold on Doc's shoulder. Gamely, the medic didn't say anything though he felt like protesting. But taking one step forward, Doc was glad he had Littlejohn's strong arm for support. He couldn't get to the sheltering farm house soon enough.

"Do you think you ought to check it to make sure no one's there?" Doc suddenly spoke when they had traversed half the distance.

"I'm sure it's okay," Littlejohn replied. He was concentrating on the ditch that was a few steps ahead and hoping it wouldn't give Doc too much difficulty to get over.

Doc bit back the urge to argue. He wasn't a foot soldier used to leading patrols, but he knew Sergeant Saunders would have sent a scout ahead. He trusted Littlejohn wouldn't do anything to hurt him, but still--just as the thought entered Doc's mind, he saw a brief flash of movement in one of the house's windows.

The shot sounded and struck just as Doc pushed all of his weight against Littlejohn. Falling forward, the private lost his grip on the medic, and Littlejohn continued to roll as several shots lashed the dust. The ditch opened beneath him, and he fell the short way to the bottom.

Even before Littlejohn hit the dirt, he was worried about Doc. Rebounding from the bottom of the ditch, Littlejohn reached back for his friend. To his horror, he saw Doc was no where near his arm's reach, and the spatter of bullets again drove him back to shelter.

Frustrated he was pinned down and fearful for his friend, Littlejohn called out, "Doc, can you hear me? Are you alright?"



It felt like hours had passed, but in reality it was only thirty or forty minutes. A sigh of dissatisfaction broke the silence when Kurt shifted his weight from one foot to another. Erich, who had been curled up in the far corner of the room, raised his eyes to see Kurt hadn't moved from his position at the window. Wetting his lips, Erich ventured a question.

"What are we going to do?"

He watched while his feeble words broke around Kurt's tense back, and then the experienced soldier sighed again and relaxed his ramrod posture. "One of us needs to go and report to our field commander. They need to know the Americans have advanced and pushed us out of the town."

"Why didn't they leave more men to help us hold our position?" Feeling bolder that the answer wasn't accompanied by shouts or curses, Erich ventured from the floor to his knees and then slowly stood.

"Because," Kurt said in a weary tone that implied he had gone over this a dozen times in his mind, "we were just the forward fringe of our line. We were the warning system, and we need to pass the warning back to the commander."

"Who's going to go?" Erich had to ask the question though he was afraid what the answer might be. What if they had to split up? Would it be better to be alone in the house or to press on through enemy territory?

"I'll go," Kurt made his decision firmly. "You'll stay here because we'll need a rendezvous point before we counterattack the town."

"I suppose," Erich was cut off by a quick gesture from Kurt.

"Come to the window, but don't stand directly in front of it. Stay hidden behind the wall. Look out across the yard, see that ditch?" Kurt saw Erich's nod and continued. "If you see any Americans coming, shoot them before they get to the ditch. That way they can't get to cover and keep you pinned down."

"Do you think any Americans would be following us?"

"It's always a possibility, but I doubt it." Kurt knelt down and began to take a quick inventory of the available ammunition and water he had carried.

Divvying out a small pile of bullets and a water bag, he rearranged the rest on his belt. "You'll be fine."

Not wanting to further embarrass himself, though he was sure he couldn't worsen his previous mistakes, Erich just nodded. He had been watching Kurt rearrange the supplies and had completely forgotten about the window.

"Now," Kurt stood and walked toward the door. "I'll be back soon, or someone else from the platoon will be. Should be an hour, maybe two."

"Alright," Erich nodded.

"Keep a sharp eye on the window, you don't want to be surprised." Kurt paused with his hand on the door.



With a shamed face, Erich turned back to the window and was shocked to see two men barely thirty feet from the house. They were almost on top of the ditch. His muscles responding to pure reaction, Erich brought his rifle up and quickly fired at the smaller figure who was leaning on the taller man. As he fired, he was only aware of a sudden, sickening rush of déjà vu. The smaller man jerked back with his arms flailing for support that wasn't there. Again his white sleeve brassard flashed in the sunlight, perfectly highlighting the crimson cross.

He had done it again.



When no answer came, Littlejohn raised his voice and took a quick peek over the lip of the ditch. Ducking down just as a bullet whistled over his helmet, the sight of Doc lying motionless scared Littlejohn. He had no idea if the medic was alive or dead. Then the weight of his role hit Littlejohn--he alone could get Doc out of their predicament. There were no squad mates to rely on, no one to give orders or take the lead. Littlejohn was on his own.

If his mind wasn't in high gear before, it certainly was now. Again, the pounding guilt that overshadowed him for weeks was pushed to the far corner of his mind. No longer weighed down with the past, Littlejohn thought only of the present predicament. What should he do? There had to be some way to rescue Doc and get away from the Germans. But even as the thoughts came to his mind, he felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. No, the situation was too hopeless. Without Sergeant Saunders and the rest of the guys... Littlejohn had never felt so useless in all his life.

Lying in the bottom of the shallow drainage ditch that barely concealed his bulky frame, Littlejohn tried to figure out how many Germans were in the farm house. From the rate of fire, there was at least

one and possibly two. Unless, of course, others were concealed and flanking his position at this very moment.

A groan broke through his reverie. Almost sitting up but catching himself, Littlejohn called out Doc's name. "Are you alright? Can you hear me?"

"Littlejohn?"

Doc's whisper was barely audible, but Littlejohn heard it. "Where did you get hit?"

"Stomach, I guess."

"Can you move?"

"I think so," Doc gritted his teeth and experimented by flexing a couple muscles. The pain was tremendous, but he knew he needed to move to shelter.

"Think you can roll over? Maybe I can grab you if you just get a little closer."

"No," Doc mentally shook his head at Littlejohn's directions. "Keep your head down so they don't shoot at you."

"Alright, but be careful." Littlejohn readied himself to pull Doc to safety.

However, the Germans had been watching as well; just as Doc rolled himself onto his side a warning shot barely missed his blood soaked shirt. Startled, Doc fell back flat though his silhouette still offered a large target to the Germans.

"Doc!" Littlejohn cried out when he heard the shot.

"They missed. Don't think they want me to move though."

"I'm going to look around and see if there's a way out of this ditch," Littlejohn informed Doc. "Maybe there's a way to flank the farmhouse."

Doc's weak acknowledgement and fear that time was running out goaded Littlejohn to crawl forward. He had to go slow in order not to break cover of the lean ditch. Dragging his rifle beneath him, Littlejohn crept on knees and elbows. Then the ditch seemed to take a sharp left hand turn. Having a feeling this was the wrong direction, Littlejohn took a careful reconnaissance look over the edge to confirm his suspicions. The ditch was leading away from the house towards open fields. He'd be a dead sitting duck if he tried to go further and exit the ditch.

There was no room to turn around, so Littlejohn had to back up the entire way. Pebbles and scraps of dirt pulled at his pant legs, tugging them from the security of his tightly laced boots. His calves were starting to ache from the strain and rub, but he continued his reverse crawl. Doc was still out in the open, and Littlejohn had promised to take care of him.

Suddenly his boot heels hit something hard, and carefully he lifted his head over his shoulder to see what opposed him now. The end of the ditch greeted him, a sight he did not want to see. Apparently he had crawled right past his point of entry and found that the ditch was unfinished. He was rapidly running out of options.

With the ditch's geography starting to blend together, Littlejohn slowly moved a foot or two and then stopped to listen. Then he saw a break along the ditch's left wall where he had rolled down. Chancing his luck, Littlejohn raised his voice slightly, "Doc?"

"Right here," came the faint reply.

"Doc, there's no way out. Behind me the ditch dead ends and in front it gets too far away. I don't know what to do."

"Littlejohn," Doc's hesitation was evident, "do you think you could get a grenade through the window?"

When there was no reply from the ditch, Doc asked again, "Littlejohn? Did you hear me?"

Littlejohn heard every word. He could feel his heart pounding in his head, and his hands and feet grew cold as all the blood rushed from them. Without noticing, his trembling hands were latched securely around his rifle in a grip so secure nothing could have torn it from him.

A grenade.

Scott's face.

Never again.

"Littlejohn?" Doc couldn't hide his concerned tone. He started to reach toward the ditch; he needed to help his friend.

Then something smashed into his boot leaving his foot numb and aching. Flattening back on the ground didn't help, for another low bullet burned a fiery path across his chest. A quarter inch lower--Doc didn't want to think about that. Instead he was thankful he was already lying on the ground and he again

fought to get hold of his breath. Deep respirations were nearly impossible with the burning pain across his chest.

When the shots cracked, they took a split second to register in Littlejohn's mind. But when realization sunk in, the coldness was pushed away with a hot wave of anger. Shooting a noncombatant was one thing, but continuing to shoot an unarmed, wounded man was an entirely different matter. Slowly, his fingers loosened around the rifle stock. Unmindful of the painful indentations that scored his hands from the wood and iron of the M1, Littlejohn reached for his web belt.

Withdrawing the grenade, he barely gave it a glance before screwing his eyes shut. Instead his mind was rebuilding the farm house, trying to remember the details of the windows and doors. If he crawled forward a short way, he would be directly across from a window. He would have to acquire his target before he saw it, for moving up and throwing the grenade needed to be one solid motion. Taking a deep breath, Littlejohn tensed himself and pulled the pin from the grenade.

Suddenly out of the clear, cloudless day, smoke rolled in and securely wrapped its smothering thickness around his senses. The shadow of Scott approached, bloodied and gashed, a sardonic smile slanting his once pleasant features.

"No! You don't understand, I have to do it," Littlejohn pleaded with the ghost. "I have to save Doc. Please."

Then the twisted figment of Littlejohn's imagination seemed to shed its horrible image. The blood and gashes disappeared and Scott's true smile revealed itself. With sudden clarity, Littlejohn realized that he had created the nightmares of the past weeks. While he never could repay Scott for that fateful day at the bridgehead, Littlejohn could forgive himself and continue to fight to ensure good men like Scott would never be put in harm's way again. He could do it. He would live, and he would save Doc. The last vestige of Scott's image nodded with satisfaction and then vanished along with the smoke.

Drawing a deep breath, Littlejohn focused on the task at hand. Then with mind and muscles moving in perfect motion, Littlejohn sprang up and hurled the grenade toward the window. Without hesitation, he fell back into the ditch as bullets clipped the air above his head. The Germans had nearly missed him, but he hoped his luck was running the other way.

With the explosion of the grenade still ringing in his ears, Littlejohn checked the rifle loads and then quickly went over the ditch's side. Moving quietly toward the house, he was back in his old form and ingrained habits of a veteran soldier. Poised to kick the door open and take care of any survivors, Littlejohn silently willed Doc to be alright.

"A few minutes more Doc, hang in there."



Erich didn't even notice the hard shove when Kurt pushed him away from the window. He wasn't sure how he ended up back against the far corner of the house. He couldn't feel the heavy wood grain of the rifle stock that he clutched in his hands. All he could see was the medic falling. How could he have blundered so disastrously? Twice, he had shot the same innocent man, twice in less than two hours.

He was looking toward Kurt, who was firing through the window at steady intervals, but the room seemed to be filled with a drift of smoke or fog. Time was suspended; the rifle shots sounded distant and empty. The sound of Kurt's voice, whether cursing or calling, was a mere replica of his true tone.

For some time, Erich watched the events without comprehension. Kurt had stopped firing, and all was quiet and still. It was as if the entire house had drawn its breath and was waiting, waiting, waiting for the inevitable rush of action. Caught in the limbo, Erich's mind continuously looped the battle in the town and the two soldiers' approach to the farmhouse.

Then it happened. Kurt was firing his rifle again but to no avail. A small, oblong metal ball sailed through the window and landed on the floor between the two soldiers. Staring at the object, Erich saw his absolute in the death filled orb. Here was the chance to right his wrongs. Here was his peace, his release from the blunders of this insane war.

Erich smiled. He was free.



Littlejohn had witnessed similar scenes countless times before, but he still was never fully prepared for the aftermath of a grenade. There were two bodies in the room. One was lying beneath the window, rifle in hand and spent cartridges littering the floor around him. The second--a far younger soldier--was slumped against the far wall. Even under the blood and gore, Littlejohn thought he saw a smile on the boy's face. It was a sight that was at odds concerning war and battle, but nonetheless the expression was frozen over the boy's features.

There were no other hiding places in the one room house, and Littlejohn scouted around the outside before running back to Doc. Jumping over the ditch, he skidded to a halt beside his fallen comrade. Blood from the newest wound was soaking the front of Doc's shirt, and Littlejohn grabbed bandages and sulfa from his web belt. Raiding Doc's medic bag as well and knotting several bandages together allowed Littlejohn to securely pad and wrap the long furrow across Doc's chest. Thankfully, for the moment, the medic was unconscious.

Peeling his own jacket off, Littlejohn wrapped it around Doc and buttoned it. Doc's face was pale from the loss of blood, and he was sweating, though his skin felt cool to the touch even under the summer sun. Just as he fastened the last button on the jacket, Doc stirred and opened his eyes.

"Littlejohn?"

"Right here," the private responded to his friend's whisper and carefully placed his hand on Doc's shoulder.

"You make it through?"

"Yes. I just threw the grenade..." Littlejohn paused for a moment. He would never be able to throw another grenade without thinking about Scott, but he was no longer weighed down with unforgivable guilt.

"...but it's okay now."

"I knew you could, Littlejohn." Doc's quiet confidence carried across the afternoon breeze. "You did well."

But the effort of speaking was too much, and the medic choked on the last word with a cough that shook his entire body. Grimacing in pain, Doc tried to suppress the cough and catch his breath. When he finally could, he lay still for a long moment before speaking.

"We ought to get started back, can't be that far now."

"Do you think you're up to it? Are you hurting anywhere else?"

Doc took a minute as his brain did a slow inventory of the pain and hurt that seemed to surround him. "Can't feel my foot," he finally replied.

When Littlejohn went to check it out, he saw that Doc's left boot heel was completely sheared off. Carefully, Littlejohn examined Doc's foot but couldn't find any signs of bleeding.

"Your boot heel is shot off but I don't think you've been hit. Your foot is swelling though, think we ought to remove the boot or leave it on?"

"Leave it on, I guess. We can probably stuff a rag or something in the heel so I can walk."

"You're not walking."

"Littlejohn..." Doc tried to protest but was overrun by the private's flat insistence.

"I'm carrying you out, and it will be fine. We'll make it back to the hospital." Littlejohn was adamant. Settling his helmet firmly on his head, he took a brief drink of water before securing the canteen to his belt.

Slowly he eased Doc up into a sitting position. "Put your arms around my neck," Littlejohn instructed. Trying to keep his movements smooth and steady to minimize Doc's discomfort, Littlejohn held a steady grip around Doc's shoulders and legs, and stood. The wounded man couldn't suppress the shuddering groan that resulted from the movement.

"I'm sorry Doc, but I gotta get you back."

"It's too far."

"I'm not leaving you behind." Littlejohn was determined and turned deaf ears to Doc's protests. He had a mission to complete. Scott's ghost was at rest, but Doc's life needed to be saved.



It was late the next day when Lieutenant Hanley and his men returned. They had been relieved from holding the observation position and gratefully walked back to headquarters. Ignoring his billet for

the moment, Saunders fell in step with Hanley. Having not received word about either Doc or Littlejohn, each hoped for the best as they ducked through the low entrance of the hospital tent.

Following a nurse's instructions, they easily found Doc who was sleeping. The strain he had been under was evident through the many bandages and dressings that covered his wounds, but he appeared to be resting comfortably. Hanley picked up the chart on the end of his bed and replaced it after a brief perusal. The empty chair next to Doc's cot was tempting, but Saunders knew he couldn't sit down and rest yet. They still had to locate Littlejohn.

"Excuse me," Hanley stopped another nurse with a smile, "I need to find a soldier who's undergoing psychiatric evaluation. Where might he be?"

"As far as I know, we don't have any one listed under observation. What is his name?"

"Private First Class Littlejohn," Hanley answered. A tiny alarm bell sounded at the nurse's words.

"He would have turned himself in," Saunders spoke softly, almost to reassure himself as well as Hanley.

"Very tall man? Quiet?" at the Lieutenant's affirming nod, the nurse pointed down the cot lined hallway. "He should be on the other side, near the corner. Poor man just about collapsed from exhaustion when he carried this medic in," she gestured toward Doc.

"Thank you," Hanley murmured, and the nurse left them.

"He would have turned himself in as you ordered," the sergeant repeated.

"I want to see his doctor," Hanley nodded as he tried not to jump to conclusions without reviewing the full details.

Saunders was one step ahead of him, and the lieutenant followed the sergeant as they wound their way around patients and hospital staff. They caught sight of a doctor and noticed that twenty feet beyond him was Littlejohn. The doctor was reviewing a patient's chart and glanced up in annoyance when the lieutenant cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, Doctor, that man over there," Hanley pointed out Littlejohn. The private was sitting up and buttoning up a shirt. "What treatment is he under?"

Following Hanley's direction, the doctor caught sight of Littlejohn. "Him? Nothing, he was here for plain exhaustion. I've just released him back to his squad. Why?" The doctor scrutinized the officer and noncom.

"He's not here for psychic evaluation?"

"Lieutenant," the captain stressed Hanley's rank, "if you're insinuating everyone who carries a wounded friend until they're past exhaustion and practically collapses at my feet is crazy, then the entire Army needs to undergo psyche eval. Frankly, I don't have the time to discuss the why, who, and what of a courageous deed. Your man is fit in mind and body and I'm returning him to active duty."

"Yes sir," Hanley's words were clipped, and then he added, "thank you."

Giving only a grunt for a reply, the doctor turned and continued his rounds.

Hanley glanced at Saunders and raised an eyebrow. "Well,"

Saunders nearly had to bite his lip to hide his amusement after the doctor's tirade. He managed a "Guess it's okay," and was saved from saying anything else when Littlejohn caught sight of the pair.

"Hi Sarge, Lieutenant!" his feature split into a wide grin.

"You're looking better, Littlejohn," Saunders smiled as well.

"I am feeling better, and the doctor just released me." Littlejohn fastened the last button on his shirt and stood up. "How's Doc?"

"Doing well, though he's sleeping now," Hanley answered. "You have your gear ready? You can walk back with us."

"One of the nurses stored it for me. I kinda was out of it when I got here yesterday." Littlejohn suddenly stiffened when he remembered Hanley's long ago order that had sent him to the hospital in the first place. "Lieutenant I didn't--"



Hanley smoothly cut him off. "The doctors released you in good health and that's all I need to know."

"Thank you sir," Littlejohn's gratefulness was evident.

"Glad you're back with us. I have some other things to wrap up, but I'll see you and the rest of the squad later." He placed a hand on Littlejohn's shoulder before nodding goodbye and leaving.

"Let's find your gear," Saunders started to follow the Lieutenant but paused when Littlejohn didn't move. The big man looked like he had something on his mind and Saunders waited for him to speak.

"Sarge, it was like I was living in a fog all these past weeks. I knew what was going on, but I wasn't aware. Like I was cut off from everything. But yesterday, when they were shooting at Doc," he paused for a long moment before continuing. "It was like the smoke finally cleared away. I knew what I had to do."

Saunders nodded, and then repeated the Lieutenant's words. "Glad you're back with us."

"So am I Sarge, so am I."

The End