

SOULMENDER

By: DocB

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Thank you to KT for suggesting the title, and for being a sounding board for the story...

Editorial comment: Doc has been given a real first name for this story, purely a figment of the author's imagination.

His wife found him sitting on the front steps, shoulders slumped, one hand covering his eyes. Tears were streaming down his face as silent sobs rocked his frame. In his other hand he held a yellowed and tattered envelope, crumpled in his tight grasp.

"John? Honey, what's wrong?" She hurried to his side, worried and scared. As she knelt next to him and touched his shoulder, he flinched and jerked away as though that light touch had been a vicious slap. Then he realized who she was. Drying his eyes on his sleeve, he silently handed her the envelope.

"John? What is it?" she pleaded. "What's happened?"

With a tear-choked voice, he said, "This came in the mail today."

She looked down at the envelope that he had thrust into her hands, then looked back up at him. Confusion creased her face. Frowning, she said, "John, this was mailed forty years ago. What do you mean it came in today's mail?"

"The mailman said it must have been lost all these years, stuck in a crack or under a counter or something. He didn't know how it happened, but he said it came to the post office with today's mail. It's addressed to me at my folks' house."

"They've been dead for twenty-five years. How did he know to bring it here?"

"He used to know my dad years ago. He said we should call the newspaper and have them write this up. A miracle, he called it. A miracle that this letter was found after all these years, and that he was able to deliver it to me."

"That doesn't sound like a miracle, that sounds more like bad service!" She smoothed the envelope and turned it over in her hand. "What is it, anyway?" she asked.

"A letter from a very old, dear friend of mine. A man I thought was dead before this letter was ever written. And for 40 years I've had no reason to think otherwise." Tears welled in his eyes again.

"Someone you knew in the Army?"

"Yes, we called him the Preacher. He was a good man."

"What happened to him?"

"I left him for dead in a foxhole in France."

France, 1944

"Hey, Preacher!" Kirby called over his shoulder. "Put your Bible away and come play some poker with us!"

"No, thanks," the young GI in the corner said. "I'm reading."

"What'sa matter? Ya think you're too good fer us? C'mon!" Kirby persisted.

"Kirby, leave 'im alone," Doc said quietly. "He's not doin' you no harm."

"Aw, nuts, Doc, I was just messin' with 'im!" Kirby grinned. "He's in the Army, he should expect to be messed with!"

"It's his first day here, and you take some gettin' used to, Kirby!" Doc grinned back.

The newcomer sat propped on a cot reading a small New Testament. He was a fair-haired man, large by any standards, rivaling Littlejohn in stature. A fresh red scar marred the man's classic Nordic features and his uniform showed the wear of battle. He absently rubbed the scar on his cheek with his thumb while he read. As Doc approached, he looked up from his book.

"Hey, I'm Doc," the medic introduced himself and stuck out his hand.

"Hi, Doc, I'm Paul Blackwell," the younger man replied, shaking Doc's hand.

"Thanks for sticking up for me, but it really wasn't necessary. I just ignore those comments. Get 'em all the time, ever since basic. They're usually just blowing smoke.

I've found that the more scared a man is, the more ridicule he dishes out to those he perceives to be 'brave.' They don't realize that my 'bravery' is just faith in God."

"That's very perceptive," Doc replied. "I've often thought that myself. But with Kirby, it's just 'cause he's annoying by nature!"

The other man chuckled. "Well, I've met a few of them, too. There's always one in every outfit!"

"Where you from, Paul? Oh, and you might as well get used to being called 'Preacher,' 'cause I have a feeling that nickname is yours for good!"

"I'm from Missouri. Was studying for the pulpit when I got drafted," the man replied. "So I guess 'Preacher' is as good a name as any!"

"Nice to know ya, Preacher. You need anything, just let me know, okay?" Doc turned to leave, then stopped. "By the way," he said loudly enough for the men at the poker table to hear, "if Kirby gives you a hard time, just tell him you and Littlejohn will meet him in a dark alley! That'll shut 'im up! Right, Kirby?"

Caje laughed and slapped Kirby on the back. "Hey, Kirby, he's already got your number!"

"Aw, nuts to you guys," Kirby grumbled. "Deal the cards, Caje."

Arkansas, USA, 1984

He picked at his food, mechanically swallowing a few bites. He didn't taste what he ate, and didn't care whether he ate at all. His wife watched him push his food around until the plate looked like one of Picasso's canvasses. His mind was forty years and thousands of miles away. He stared at the plate, seeing instead a muddy foxhole and a torn and bloody body. The scene had plagued his dreams for years, but he thought he had finally laid it to rest just as he thought the body had been laid to rest.

He seldom talked about his months on the front lines in France. He'd never told his wife of the horrors he'd seen, but she knew. She was with him at night when the nightmares overtook his tired body and tired mind. She was at his side when he yelled out in the night, or when he awoke trembling and drenched with sweat. She'd heard him call out the names of his squad mates, or of the men he'd seen killed. Gradually, over the years, the nightmares had subsided. She had hoped that he'd finally been able to release the emotional and psychological pain that those terrible months had inflicted. Now she could see that he'd only buried the pain so deeply that it took a bombshell like the letter today to unearth it.

Reaching across the table, she took one of his hands in hers. He looked up at her, and she could see the unfathomable sadness on his face. She longed to comfort him, as she had done for years whenever the memories were too much for him, but she knew this pain was different.

"Honey, what are you going to do?" she asked.

He shook his head and whispered, "I don't know. I just don't know."

In the middle of the night she awoke with a start. She reached over and found his side of the bed empty. She was startled by muffled thumps coming from the attic. Quickly slipping into a robe and slippers, she made her way up the narrow, dusty attic steps. There, in the dim light of a single 40-watt bulb, John was emptying a trunk, pawing through it like a madman. She could hear him muttering to himself.

"It's here. It's gotta be here. I know I didn't throw it away. Where is it?" He frantically dug out object after object, throwing some immediately on the floor, examining the others more closely. He thrust his hand into every pocket of every jacket and pair of

trousers, pulling the pockets inside out. He riffled through all the books, holding them upside down and flipping the pages. Then, sinking to his knees, he reached into the bottom of the trunk and slowly lifted out a medic's rucksack. Reverently, he held it at arm's length for a long moment before clutching it to his chest. Rocking back on his heels, he let the memories flood his mind.

France, 1944

"Okay, saddle up," Sergeant Saunders called. "We're going on a little walk in the woods this morning!"

"Hey, Sarge, where we goin'? I mean, do I have to get prettied up or anything?" Kirby asked.

"Kirby, you're plenty pretty already," Cajé laughed. "Only thing you need is a little soap and water!"

"Let's go, guys. No time for breakfast. Grab some rations and ammo," Saunders commanded.

"Uh, Sergeant Saunders, do you mind if I pray before we go?" Preacher asked quietly.

Kirby looked at him in amazement. "What... you mean out loud???"

The NCO glanced from Kirby to Preacher. The tall man's clear, earnest gaze held Saunders', and the sergeant gave him a brief nod.

"Aw, Sarge, you ain't gonna let 'im do that, are you?" Kirby asked. "That's like goin' to church in dirty clothes. I mean, look at us!"

"Well, Kirby, I figure it this way," Saunders said. "Who needs prayer more than we do? We're going on a patrol into Kraut territory, they're going to try to kill us if they can, and they just might succeed. So a quick prayer isn't going to hurt anything, and it might just help. And we can sure use all the help we can get." He nodded again to Preacher. "Gather 'round, everyone. Preacher's got somethin' to say before we take off."

"Thanks, Sarge." Preacher cleared his throat. "I know I'm new here and you all aren't familiar with my ways yet, but I like to start every patrol with a short prayer asking for God's protection."

He took off his helmet and cradled it in his arms as he bowed his head. He offered a simple and direct prayer, naming each squad mate and asking for Divine providence. He prayed as though he were speaking to a good friend standing nearby. His words were spoken with a familiarity and intimacy gained only by long experience. As he uttered the 'amen,' Cajé crossed himself and assumed the point position.

Kirby scratched his head and mumbled, "Don't that beat all..." as Doc came up beside him.

"What do you mean, Kirby?" the medic asked.

"Huh? Oh, sorry, Doc, I didn't see ya there," Kirby stammered. "I just meant, all of a sudden I feel kinda... good about this patrol. Relaxed, I guess. Like nothing bad is gonna happen today."

"Well, don't let your guard down. Remember, the Lord helps those who help themselves!" Doc chuckled.

"Hey, Preacher," Doc hurried to catch up with the new man. "Thanks for the prayer. It's kinda nice to hear it said out loud once in a while!"

"I know. It's good to pray aloud—keeps me in practice," Preacher agreed.

"Seems like there's never enough time for spiritual things around here. We're too busy

trying to stay alive to worry about keeping body and soul together!"

Arkansas, USA, 1984

He'd fallen into a fitful sleep just as the palest hues of pink were creeping over the horizon. His wife slipped quietly from the bed, pausing long enough to draw the blanket up over his shoulders. Even in sleep his eyelashes were damp with unshed tears and his hands twitched convulsively.

He awoke a few hours later, no more rested than when he'd lain down. His face was lined and drawn, and fatigue rimmed his eyes. All the nightmares and horrors of France had been replayed in his dreams, leaving him as exhausted as he had been on all those night patrols forty years ago.

He scratched at his stubbled cheek and sipped the cup of strong black coffee that his wife had brought him. She, sensitive to his moods after nearly forty years of married life, watched him with affection and concern.

"Did you find what you were looking for last night?" she asked gently.

He nodded, a faraway look in his eyes. "I found more than I was looking for," he replied. "And I know what I have to do."

"What's that?"

"I have to find him." John sighed as he put the coffee cup in the sink. "I have to know what happened. I have to know if he's still alive."

"I realized that when you showed me the letter yesterday," she replied. "I was hoping you would come to that conclusion yourself. Maybe then you can put the nightmares behind you once and for all."

"Maybe," he whispered. "Or maybe the nightmares have just begun."

France, 1944

"Kirby, cover me!" called Preacher.

They had stumbled into a machine gun nest, well hidden in the underbrush, and now the squad was pinned down. Sarge was moving along the flank, crawling through the tall grass. The Thompson was cradled in his arms as he shimmied forward. He wanted to get a grenade into the nest, but he had little cover and would be easy prey if he was spotted.

Caje was behind a log at the other flank and was drawing most of the fire. He kept his head down, only lifting it occasionally to take a hurried shot with his rifle. The constant firing of the machine gun was kicking up clouds of dust and wood chips, obscuring his line of sight. Usually the marksman of the squad, today his shooting was ineffective.

"What are you gonna do?" Kirby called back.

"I'm going right up the middle—they won't expect that!" Preacher started crawling forward.

"Hey, wait a minute! You can't do that!" Kirby hollered. "You'll be cut to ribbons!"

"No, I won't. Just cover me!" Preacher continued his advance, slithering through the grass like a giant blond snake.

The booming of the BAR behind him and the answering chatter of the machine gun in front of him covered the sounds of his movements. Kirby couldn't believe that the

Krauts didn't see Preacher—he was right in front of them, yet might as well have been invisible. The BAR man kept up a continual curtain of fire, glancing around occasionally to see where Sarge and Cajé were. The rest of the squad, stupefied by Preacher's boldness, fired off their M1's as rapidly as they could. Empty shell casings and magazines pinging to the ground added to the cacophony.



Preacher's long arm swung in a slow arc as he released a grenade. The missile sailed into the nest and detonated, rocking the ground with its lethal power. Showers of dirt mixed with white-hot shrapnel sent a geyser of death into the air. The vacuum of sudden silence was broken by a single moan, cut short by a choking gasp as a final breath was wrenched from the machine gunner's lungs.

Preacher stood, looking down into the faces of the dead Germans, and prayed.

"Ho, boy, Preacher, am I glad you're on our side!" Kirby clapped the taller man on the back.

Smoke rose from the crater torn by the grenade, lending a backdrop to the tableau of war-weary soldiers. Cajé and Sarge checked the Germans, turning over the torn bodies to look for signs of life. Kirby, Littlejohn, and Billy were clustered around Preacher, who was shaking his head.

"I hated to do it, to kill another human being, but sometimes that's what we're called to do," he murmured.

Doc stood off to one side and watched the man. 'He's an enigma,' the medic thought. 'Kill a man and then pray over his body.' Preacher glanced over at him, and Doc was stunned to see intense pain and sorrow in the man's eyes. 'But he doesn't take either killing or praying lightly.'

Arkansas, USA, 1984

"I found my notebook, where I wrote down the addresses of the men in my squad," John told his wife. "I guess that's where I'll have to start looking for Preacher. I know what his address was forty years ago. I'll write a letter... or better yet, it's only a few hour's drive. Maybe we can make a day of it."

"Are you sure you're up to it? You didn't sleep very well," she said.

"I don't want to put this off any longer. The sooner I start looking, the sooner I'm likely to find out what happened to him."

She packed a picnic lunch while he was shaving, and they were on the road by mid-morning. They drove north on Hwy. 71 toward Missouri and passed through some of the most beautiful country God ever created. Limestone bluffs towered, overhanging the road and, as they approached southwestern Missouri, the panorama of the Elk River was breathtaking. Small campsites and ca bins dotted the banks of the river, providing stopping points for canoers along the water's edge. Timbered mountains ringed the small town of Noel, and the trees were ablaze with fiery fall colors.

At the post office, John received his first disappointing news.

"Blackwell, Blackwell. No, no one by that name in town. Least not that we deliver any mail to," the postmaster told him. "Seems to me I remember that name from years ago, though. I've been working at this post office for almost forty years, ever since I graduated high school. But that name does ring a bell. Let me check our files."

He soon returned with a huge, dusty ledger, which he plopped open on the counter. He hummed to himself as he flipped through the brittle pages, stopping occasionally to moisten his index finger with his tongue. Finally he jabbed at one page with the same grubby finger.

"Um-hmmm, um-hmmm, just what I thought. My memory isn't so bad after all. The last time we had any Blackwells to deliver to was way back in 1956. And that was Joseph and Mary Blackwell. Joseph and Mary... now ain't that funny! A wonder I didn't remember THAT!" He chuckled at his own humor. "Them the folks you're lookin' for?" he asked.

John shook his head. "No, I wanted to find Paul Blackwell."

"Paul. Now why didn't you say so in the first place? 'Course I knew Paul way back when. He was ahead of me in high school, but they had all kinda trophies in the trophy case from him playin' football and basketball. That was quite some kid! What an athlete! A legend in his own time."

John felt his heart quicken. "Was there a forwarding address? Do you know what happened to him? Where he is now?"

"No, can't say that I do. Leastways not for the last forty years. Knew he went in the Army. Knew he came back all busted up. Knew he was in a German P.O.W. camp till the end of the war. Had a chest full o' medals when he finally got home. But that's all. Oh, I think maybe he went to seminary somewheres. Always wanted to be a preacher, ever since he was a young 'un."

John tried not to show his disappointment. "Well, thank you for your time. I appreciate it."

"Oh, one more thing," the postmaster said. "You might try checking at the library for old back issues of the newspaper. That might tell you something."

"I'll do that. Thanks again." John shook the postmaster's hand and walked out into the sunshine. The disappointment had turned to hope in his mind. At least he had something to go on now.

At the library, he was told that back issues of the newspaper were on microfiche. The librarian set the machine up for him, and he and his wife spent the rest of the afternoon reading small-town gossip and war news from four decades ago. He had never discussed or read about the war after he came home. The memories were just too painful to be dredged up once he'd buried them in his subconscious.

If the letter that he had received yesterday had cracked the dam that held back the memories, then the first-hand newspaper accounts of the war that he read today broke the dam wide open and let the memories flood out. It was almost more than he could bear.

Finally they found an article written after Preacher had come home from the war. He was the hero of the town. The writer of the article had listed Preacher's wounds along with the medals that he had won. The worst of his injuries were a chest wound, a leg wound from which he had a permanent limp, and facial burns with scarring of one side of his face. He had won several purple hearts, a bronze star, and a silver star.

Most heart-wrenching to John was the account of Preacher's time in the German P.O.W. camp. His life had been saved by a German doctor after he had been found near death, lying in a foxhole. John forced himself to read the details, even though the words blurred through the tears in his eyes. The soldier had nearly bled to death from a

bullet wound to the chest. It had pierced one lung and exited out his back. When he was found, he was unconscious, barely breathing, and clutching a small Bible in one hand.

Once Preacher's condition had stabilized in the German field hospital, he had been placed on a hospital train and sent on his way to Germany to a P.O.W. camp. The train had been bombed by the Allies, and Preacher had suffered horrendous burns to the face and a shattered leg. Without proper medical treatment, the leg had healed poorly, and the burns had scarred and contorted his handsome face.

The newspaper article showed a picture of Preacher arriving home from the war. John caught his breath when he saw how wasted the once-robust man had become. In the picture, he was leaning heavily on a cane, and had self-consciously turned the scarred side of his face away from the camera. His dress uniform hung on him like a sack, accentuating his skeletal thinness.

'I could have spared him this,' John thought. 'I could have saved him from this anguish and pain...'

France, 1944

"Hey, Preacher, what're you gonna do on your three-day pass?" Doc asked as he watched the man pack his duffel.

"Well, Doc, I just talked to the company chaplain, and he says there's a church over in Belvoir that can use some help. They run an orphanage and soup kitchen, and the building was pretty heavily damaged from shelling a couple of days ago. I thought I'd go over and see what I can do to help. How 'bout you?"

"Oh, I don't know. I haven't really decided what to do. Seems like an awful lot of fuss to try to get to Paris for just a couple of days. But I don't really want to stick around here either." Doc paused, thoughtful. "Say, do you think they could use more help over there in Belvoir? I know how to swing a hammer..."

"Sure, the more the merrier! Jeep leaves in twenty minutes—think you can be ready?"

"You bet!" Doc grinned, grabbing his duffel.

"Don't forget to bring your Bible, too," Preacher reminded him. Doc patted his jacket pocket.

Belvoir was a sleepy little medieval village tucked into the rolling hills of Normandy farmland. It straddled the banks of an indolent mossy river where generations of young boys and old men had fished and daydreamed. A stone bridge, once used by horses and mules, arched across the stream. The town's main street stretched from the bridge at one end to the gothic spired church at the other. Lining the street were small shops and patisseries, usually thronged with busy shoppers hurrying to finish their errands, or taking time for a pleasant repast.

The recent heavy shelling had decimated the street. Windows had been blown out, leaving most of the shops exposed to the elements. Broken glass and building debris littered the thoroughfare. Not one building or shop was left intact. Roofs had collapsed; walls crumbled into mounds of rubble. Café tables and chairs had been twisted into useless pieces of metal; bits of crockery and masonry were strewn as far as the river.

The church hadn't escaped lightly either. Its main steeple lay on its side at the base of the church. The vagaries of the bombing had left the steeple neatly detached but otherwise intact. The doors of the church had been burst open by the tremendous

pressure surge of a bomb detonating at roof level. Miraculously, one stained glass window was unbroken—its shimmering colors of golds, reds, and blues were reflected outwards by the sunlight streaming through the hole in the roof. The window depicted Jesus welcoming the little children into His arms.

"Boy, when you said heavily damaged, you weren't kidding," Doc remarked as he surveyed the town's damage. "Are you sure that bridge will hold us?"

"Course I am, Doc, I have it on divine authority!" Preacher replied.

Doc glanced at him in surprise, then realized that he was teasing.

"I don't doubt it," Doc chuckled.

"Well, shall we see if we can find the priest?" Preacher inched the jeep slowly across the narrow bridge. The fenders of the jeep scraped both sides of the bridge, and Doc was afraid the vehicle would get wedged like a cork. The bridge groaned under the weight of the loaded jeep, but held fast.

They wove the jeep around craters blasted out of the cobble-stoned avenue and parked near the church. As they picked their way through the rubble and up the steps, they could hear sounds of construction from inside. Sharp hammer blows were accompanied by shouts and laughter as villagers worked to clear away debris and repair the damage.

Preacher tested the listing doors and inspected the hinges and carved wooden reliefs. The heavy brass hardware was intact, but the wooden jambs had been splintered.

"This shouldn't be too hard to fix," he commented. "We'll just have to take the doors down and replace the jambs, then re-hang the doors."

"Yep, we can do that," Doc agreed.

Suspicious faces peered at them from inside the church, and silence descended. A muscular young man in a cassock approached them and asked them something in French. Doc and Preacher looked at each other and shrugged.

"Do you speak English?" they asked the priest in unison.

"But of course. I'm Father Dominic. How may I help you?" the priest asked.

"We came to help YOU," Preacher said. "We're from the 361st, and we have a three-day pass. Thought we'd come help you rebuild your church."

"Merci, gentlemen, merci!" The priest explained to the villagers, who gathered around the two, shaking their hands and clapping them on the back. The chattering resumed as the people returned to work.

"Let's go unload the jeep," Preacher suggested.

As they carried in heavy crates of food and supplies, Doc asked, "Where'd you get all this stuff?"

Preacher smiled. "Well, my Army pay was burning a hole in my pocket, so I put it to good use. And I hit Kirby up for a donation at the poker game last night."

"Kirby? Donate to a church? How'd you get him to do that?"

"Told him I was going to pray out loud specifically for him before the next patrol. He gave me money just to shut me up!"

"Is that what they call 'hush money?'" Doc snorted.

"You said it, brother!" Preacher laughed.

They finished unloading the jeep, and Preacher handed Doc a hammer.

"Let's get to work," he said.

They joined Father Dominic on the roof, patching the holes inflicted from the shelling. A certain rhythm developed among the three, their hammers singing a madrigal as they repaired the damage. The agile priest scuttled up and down the ladder, carrying bundles of wood shingles and buckets of nails as effortlessly as a mother would carry her child. He chattered endlessly, keeping the soldiers entertained with tales of the

follies of the German army.

"They tried to conscript me," he told them, winking and nodding cheerfully. "Oh, they tried, but I..." he paused dramatically. "I have a secret weapon!"

Doc and Preacher stopped hammering and glanced at each other.

"Secret weapon?" Doc asked. "What's that?"

"Aha!" Father Dominic crowed. "Even you could not discern it, and you are a medical man. I hide it well, no?"

Doc scratched his head. "I guess you do. What is it?"

The priest stood to his full height on the sloping roof, and rapped himself sharply on the left shin with the hammer.

"Hey!" Preacher exclaimed, starting toward the priest. "Don't do that—you'll hurt yourself!"

Doc grabbed Preacher's arm, as much to keep him from falling off the roof as to keep him from knocking Father Dominic off.

"No, he won't," Doc said. "I think I understand. When did it happen?" he asked the priest.

"When I was a young child. I grew up this way, and I am used to it."

Preacher was puzzled. "When did what happen?" he asked.

"I lost my leg in an accident, and I've had an artificial one ever since. And though I function better on a wooden leg than many people do on two normal legs, no army in the world would want me. I use that to my advantage, and the advantage of my people."

Arkansas, USA, 1984

John had the librarian make copies of the article. At home later that night, he reread the story slowly, carefully, devouring every word, and pausing occasionally to wipe the tears from his eyes. The phrase, "He had been left for dead in a foxhole," pierced his soul. His memories of that fateful day had played in his nightmares over and over like a stuck movie reel for the last forty years.

He knew the search would be painful, and would probably drain every ounce of mental strength that he possessed. He also knew that he'd continue to have the nightmares till his dying day if he quit the search now. Then he'd have the added burden of feeling like he'd abandoned his friend all over again.

The last paragraph of the article was about Preacher's future plans. 'God has kept me alive for a reason. I believe that reason is to proclaim His word. I wanted to be a minister before the war, and that desire hasn't changed. I plan to enroll in seminary this fall.'

Well, that was a starting point. He could try to find the seminary that Preacher attended. They might have some information about what happened to him.

France, 1944

"Here, Doc, catch," Preacher called as he tossed a carton of rations to the medic.

"Mmmm... eggs and sausage," Doc grimaced. "Well, at least it's not sausage and eggs!"

"Are you sorry you came with me, Doc? You could be in Paris right now eating real food, enjoying the company of a warm cuddly woman, drinking a bottle of wine...."

Preacher grinned around a forkful of stew.

"What? And miss all this?" Doc smiled. "Did you see the looks on those kids' faces when we unpacked the toys you brought? Boy, that sure makes you feel good. Besides, one bottle of wine is pretty much like another."

"Yeah, those kids were pretty happy. And that makes ME happy. Not many people understand the value of giving. The more of yourself you give, the more blessings you receive." Preacher sighed with contentment. "We did a good job on that roof today, huh? Should be able to finish it tomorrow if it doesn't rain."

Doc settled his weary bones into a bedroll late that night, glad for the ache between the shoulder blades that told him he'd done something constructive. An afternoon of swinging a heavy hammer reminded him that there was more to the world than shooting and killing. Patching a damaged building was easy compared to patching a damaged body.

He slept heavily, feeling safe in the womb of the church. When he awoke, refreshed, the next morning, he found Preacher reading his Bible by the feeble early morning light filtering through the stained glass window. He reached for his jacket and extricated his own small Bible from the pocket.

"What're you reading, Preacher?" he asked.

"Reading what Paul has to say to the Philippian church—I like this passage, and try to live it the best that I can. Listen: 'Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.' Don't you think this would be a better and more peaceful world if people would just follow that one principle?" he asked.

Doc nodded his agreement and bent to read his own Bible. After a few minutes of silent reading, he looked up and asked, "Say, what kind of preacher are you going to be after the war? I mean, what kind of church?"

"I was accepted into a Methodist seminary before I joined up. Hopefully they'll still have me when I get home," Preacher replied before returning to his morning's devotions.

That day they not only finished the roof, but re-hung the doors and helped the priest remove debris and broken glass from the chapel. They uprighted the overturned pulpit and straightened pews. The crucifix had fallen off the wall and been smashed beyond repair, but several of the statues needed only a good dusting to restore them to their pre-bombing beauty. By the end of the day, the chapel was ready for worship.

When the work was finished, Father Dominic said, "I have a surprise for you. The villagers wanted to show their appreciation for what you've done, so they've arranged a party in your honor."

"A party! That's real friendly of them," Doc declared.

Preacher smiled. "Let us get cleaned up a little, and we'll be ready!"

The whole village turned out for the party. They had had little to celebrate in the last few months. This fete was a release for them, an expression of hope for the future. They knew the war wasn't over, but they could sense German defeat and an end to the brutalization and terror. The repaired church was a symbol of the repair to their lives and return to normalcy that they knew was coming.



The music was lively, and the dancing was spirited. The two men were drawn into the circle of villagers, sharing their bonhomie and their wine. The children from the orphanage surrounded the pair, clamoring for their attention and presenting them with small homemade gifts and flowers. Some of the ladies had baked cakes and pastries, which rapidly disappeared into hungry mouths until only crumbs were left as evidence of their sweetness.

The night was clear and the air was still. Stars twinkled overhead, lending their blessing to the village. The party spilled out onto the street in front of the church and had the atmosphere of a street carnival. The moon shone down on the roof of the newly repaired church, and even though the steeple hadn't yet been replaced, the building had an ethereal glow of goodwill.

Hours into the party, one of the village men motioned Father Dominic over and whispered something to him. The priest's head, bent to catch the man's quiet words, jerked up and he glanced around in alarm. He hurried over to John and Preacher and drew them off to the side.

"Bad news, I fear," he whispered. "Our lookouts have spotted German troops moving in the direction of the village."

"What do you want us to do?" Preacher asked.

"We must hide you. The Germans are between the village and your lines, and it would be suicide if you tried to drive back to your headquarters. You must gather your things and come with me. We have places that the Germans will not find you. Later we will try to get you back to your lines."

"What about the jeep?" asked Doc. "They'll know we're here if they see the jeep."

"Leave that to us. We'll take care of it," Father Dominic assured him. "Come with me."

Arkansas, USA, 1984

John picked up a thin telephone book from the shelf under the phone. He flipped the pages until he found the number to the local Methodist church. He dialed the first three digits, then hesitated. He wasn't sure that he was ready to involve strangers in his quest, but could see no other option. Steeling himself, he finished dialing.

His wife accompanied him to his appointment with the Methodist minister later that day. She held his arm as they entered the church, and her quiet strength seemed to flow into him. The minister greeted them at the door to his office, inviting them to take seats on the sofa opposite his desk. He pulled an easy chair around to face them, and said, "Now, John, what can I do to help you?"

John looked into Pastor Harding's solemn face. The minister's vibrant blue eyes were startling in their similarity to Preacher's, radiating the same compassion and kindness. John suddenly felt at ease, and began his story. He omitted no detail, telling the minister things that he hadn't told his wife. He pulled the copies of the newspaper clippings from his pocket, unfolded them, and handed them to Pastor Harding.

As the minister was reading the article, a small smile played on his lips. When he finished reading, he refolded the papers and held them out to John.

"I know Paul Blackwell's story well," Pastor Harding said. "In fact, I could add a few things to that article. Things like... Paul never held a grudge in his life. He believed that whatever happened to him was ordained of God. He wasn't ashamed or embarrassed about what happened to him in the war, but he didn't brag about it either."

It was just a part of him, a part of what went into making him who he was.

"Paul taught one of my classes in the seminary that I attended," the minister continued. "He was a beloved and admired man, gentle but firm at the same time. I told him once that I wanted to pattern my ministry after him. He was offended and said that he was just a fallible man, and that I should try to pattern my ministry after our Lord. I never forgot that. A very humble man...." the minister's voice trailed off as he reflected back.

"I lost touch with Paul many years ago, much to my shame. I don't know where he is now, or if he's still alive. I can tell you he graduated from Central Methodist College in Missouri. I have their address here somewhere. Write to them—they may have more information. And promise me that if and when you find Paul, you will give him greetings from me."

Shuffling through the paperwork on his desk, the minister found a notepad and copied down the address of the seminary. He and John shook hands and John promised to let him know when he found Paul.

France, 1944

"Hey, Sarge, the lieutenant's lookin' for ya," Cajé called.

Saunders nodded and ambled toward the CP.

"You wanted to see me, Lieutenant?" he asked as he ducked into the tent.

"I have a mission for your squad, Saunders. How soon can you be ready?" Lt Hanley was tapping a pencil impatiently on the map spread on the table in front of him. He had heavily circled a point to the east of their present position.

"Well, Lieutenant, we can be ready in fifteen minutes," Saunders replied.

"Make it ten, Saunders," Hanley said.

The NCO's curious glance took in the penciled marks. "Belvoir... isn't that where Doc and Preacher went on their pass?"

"Yes, and that's what's so urgent," Hanley sighed. "S2 reports heavy Kraut buildup between Belvoir and here. We need to get there fast or Doc and Preacher are going to be trapped and cut off from our lines. I need you to hustle to get to them. You'll take a truck as far as here," he pointed to another circle on the map, "then double-time it the rest of the way. The Krauts may already be in the town. We received word that they may be using that church for an observation post."



Saunders and Hanley looked at each other. Neither had to say what was on both their minds—that this was going to be bad. Very bad.

"They were due back a half-hour ago," Saunders said. "They haven't shown up yet."

Hanley nodded, looking grim.

"You'd better get moving," he said. "I'll get you some help as soon as I can."

Take a radio and keep in touch."

"Right, Lieutenant."

Saunders barked out orders, conveying with his tone the urgency of the mission.

"Double basic load of ammo, grenades, smoke grenades, a day's worth of rations. Let's move!" he shouted.

Men scurried for equipment, then assembled at the CP.

"What's up, Sarge? Why the rush?" Kirby asked.

"Doc and Preacher are somewhere behind Kraut lines, that's what," Saunders said. "We need to go find them. The Krauts have moved into Belvoir, and they're using the church for an OP."

"Is that the church where Doc and Preacher..." Caje started to say, but was interrupted.

"Yeah, that's the church. Let's go!" Saunders snapped.

Arkansas, USA, 1984

The emaciated face from the newspaper photo had filled out, and the scars had faded and softened with time. The hair was thinner and grayer, but still in a military-style cut. The mouth was quirked in a wry grin, but the eyes... the eyes still radiated that warmth and love for God and man that John remembered so well.

John had found a bulky manila envelope stuffed into the mailbox today, with the Central Methodist College address on the return label. His hands shook as he tore the envelope open and emptied its contents onto the kitchen table. Several pamphlets and booklets tumbled out, along with a single sheet of letterhead.

"Dear John," the letter read, "in answer to your request I have enclosed several pieces of literature authored by Rev. Paul Blackwell. Also enclosed is the official short biographical sketch of Rev. Blackwell that is used by the college in its prospectus and catalogue.

"Although we do not give out the addresses and phone numbers of our alumni without their written consent, I can tell you that he pastors a church near our campus. I hope this information helps you in your search.

"Sincerely,

"Dr. Thomas Hannes, President"

John picked up one of the booklets and read the title, "The Love of God Transcends the Evil of Man." Another pamphlet was titled, "Gaining God's Victory." A third, thicker, pamphlet read, "Living Holy In an Unholy World."

He turned one of the pamphlets over and found himself gazing into eyes that he'd never forgotten. He'd seen those eyes in his dreams for 40 years.

France, 1944

"They'll be okay," Kirby said. "They probably already prayed the Krauts into retreat!"

"Knock it off, Kirby," Sarge barked. "Move it!"

They were racing across an open field, heading for the cover of a hedgerow. Caje, in the lead, reached the hedgerow first, and motioned the others to a halt. They instantly dropped into the tall grain, their OD uniforms blending with the ripening stalks.

Caje went on the alert, sniffing the air around him and holding his position like a pointer dog. Then, step by cautious step, he advanced into the trees until he was swallowed up by the overgrowth.

Sarge crawled through the grain on his belly, tapping each soldier on the back and pointing to where that man should position himself. Like silent tendrils they wove their way through the grass, creeping slowly toward the tree line. Caje appeared, specter-like, at the edge of the hedgerow. He motioned with his hands to indicate three enemy soldiers approaching. Then he slid his bayonet from the scabbard and crouched, ready to pounce.



The fight was over before it began. The three German soldiers had no time to react or shout a warning before they were dead. Caje let them pass him before he struck, thrusting his knife deep into the last man's chest. Dropping him to the ground, he sprang as the second Kraut turned in his direction. The momentum of Caje's leap propelled him into the man, sending them both crashing to the ground. A look of surprise crossed the man's face just as Caje's knife tore through him. A spurt of blood, and another life was extinguished.

The third Kraut had turned back toward his companions. He raised his rifle, but Caje was too close for him to be able to swing it around for a good shot. The German smashed his rifle butt into Caje's shoulder and the scout's bayonet flew into the underbrush. A searing pain exploded in Caje's shoulder and he dropped back to the ground, his left arm useless. Grimacing and clutching his arm, he tried to roll away from the rifle aimed at his chest.

Then the German's eyes widened in shock, and his mouth formed a silent "Ooooh." He toppled forward, dropping his rifle at Caje's feet. A bayonet protruded from his back, buried to the hilt in his flesh. Littlejohn calmly stooped and pulled the bayonet out, wiping it on the grass before re-sheathing it.

Sarge hurried to Caje's side. The scout sat on the ground cradling his left arm and rocking back and forth, moaning in pain.

"How bad is it?" Saunders asked.

"Give me a minute," Caje grunted. "I think it's just bruised, but I can't feel my fingers."

The NCO opened the scout's shirt and felt the collar bone and shoulder.

"I don't think anything's broken. See if you can move it."

"It's okay, Sarge. I'll be okay." Caje rose to his knees, then to his feet, swaying slightly as the pain intensified.

"Here's your bayonet, Caje," Kirby said as he handed the scout his knife.

With clumsy fingers, Caje was able to sheath the knife, then bent to pick up his rifle.

"Okay?" Saunders asked.

"Yeah, Sarge, let's go. We gotta find Doc so he can give me some morphine," Caje grinned.

Arkansas, USA, 1984

John sat at the kitchen table, hunched over a road atlas, shaking his head.

"There's no direct route," he sighed. "We'll have to take a lot of state and county highways. Looks to be about two hundred miles, if we take 65 out of Springfield and then get on 73."

His wife looked over his shoulder. "That looks like the best way to go," she agreed. "When do you want to leave?"

"We have to be there for Sunday service, so we should leave on Saturday and find a hotel in town for the night."

"Fayette looks pretty small. Do you think they have a hotel in town?" she asked.

"If not, Jefferson City isn't that far," he mused. "They'll have plenty to choose from there."

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" She caressed his shoulder affectionately.

He reached around and held her hand, squeezing it gently.

"I'm not sure about anything, except that I love you," he said. "I couldn't do this without your support. How I was ever blessed with such a wonderful wife, I'll never know."

France, 1944

They had left the village in the darkest part of the night, slipping away unnoticed from the party. Now the faintest dilution of the inky blackness whispered of the coming dawn. Father Dominic was carrying an antique Lebel rifle, and extra bullets clinked together in the pocket of his cassock as the robe rustled around his legs. He was shepherding Preacher and Doc away from the village, following the river downstream.

"There is a cave, known only to the villagers, around the next bend," he whispered. "It was used for wine and cheese storage in the old days. Few come here anymore. You will be safe until I return for you."

He ushered them into the musty grotto, scrabbling around until he found a piece of candle. He lit the wick and held the taper aloft. Wavery light flickered against the damp walls, and the condensation shimmered like drops of liquid gold. Shadows fought against the weak illumination, nearly overpowering it. The rear of the cave was lost in darkness, but the downward slope of the floor and an eerie echoing drip-drip-drip gave the illusion of vastness.

"You can build a fire further back for warmth. I may not be able to come for you until tonight. You have rations? Good. And water. Do not leave the cave for any reason until I or one of the other villagers come for you. Only a few of us know you will be hiding here, so if you hear noise, be careful. It may be Germans."

"I'm afraid your jeep will not be serviceable after this, either. The village men parked it on the bridge and set fire to it, so the Germans will not be able to cross into town by that route. If they ask how the jeep got there, we will tell them it was destroyed in the bombing earlier this week, and we have not been able to figure a way to remove it from the bridge! A most inconvenient obstacle for the villagers, we will tell them."

Preacher and Doc shrugged deeper into their jackets as the priest left. The early morning chill was damp and penetrating, and a cool breeze from the river dissipated the ground fog. They dropped their gear at the mouth of the cave and set to work gathering twigs and branches to build a fire. They camouflaged the mouth of the cave with several leafy tree limbs and carried their packs to the rear of the cave.

"I'll stand watch first. Why don't you get some rest?" Preacher said once the small fire was spreading its warmth. "I'll wake you when I can't stay awake any longer."

"Yeah, okay," Doc agreed. He was only too happy to curl up near the crackling flames. He was bone-weary after the excitement of the night and the hard work of the day before, and knew he wouldn't be a very good sentry right then. He didn't know how Preacher could still seem so full of energy after what they'd been through.

Doc watched Preacher take up a position near the mouth of the cave, where he could peer through the leaves. The blond man settled his rifle across his legs and reached into his pocket. A look of puzzlement crossed his face, and he reached into his other jacket pocket. Still not finding what he wanted, he patted his shirt and pants pockets.

"Hey, Doc," his hoarse whisper echoed around the medic. "I must have left my Bible at the church. Can I borrow yours?"

"Sure," Doc said and brought the small book to the front of the cave.

"I'll give it back when I wake you," Preacher promised.

Doc returned to the fire and curled up on the hard ground, tugging his jacket around him and cradling his head on his pack. The flames popped and hissed as they consumed the damp wood. Smoke drifted up toward the unseen roof of the cave, where it hovered like a benevolent spirit watching over them. Doc felt himself spiraling down into the blackness of deep sleep, and his last thought was of the squad. He knew they would worry when he and Preacher didn't show up at battalion this morning. He hoped Sarge and the squad didn't do something stupid like try to rescue them.

Arkansas, USA, 1984

The miles sped by, but John didn't notice. They'd left home early in the morning and had stopped only for coffee and gasoline. His wife offered to drive—she could see how distracted he was—and he let her. He stared out the window at the passing scenery, but saw instead the Norman landscape of forty years ago. His wife glanced at him, but didn't disturb his reverie. The silence was comforting to him and he was grateful that his wife didn't feel the need for small talk.

An occasional sigh escaped his lips as he remembered the last time he saw Preacher. He tapped his foot nervously, incessantly, without realizing he was doing so. Tomorrow he would meet the man he had spent a lifetime trying to forget. He wanted to... no, he NEEDED to ask Preacher's forgiveness for abandoning him to the Germans. The guilt that had been buried for forty years and then unearthed three weeks ago was consuming him from the inside out, and the only way to stop it was to seek that forgiveness.

As the miles sped, the time crawled. They checked into a hotel near the church where Paul Blackwell was minister, and the long evening stretched impossibly before John. He tried reading a book, he tried watching TV, but nothing made the minute or hour hand on the clock move faster. Finally, giving up all pretense of concentration, he pulled out the file of information he had accumulated about Preacher.

Thumbing through the newspaper clippings, he was struck once again with how gruesome Preacher's injuries had been, and how he had survived his ordeal with grace and inner strength. John hadn't previously taken the time to read the pamphlets written by Rev. Blackwell, but tonight he had nothing but time. Relaxing into an easy chair, he opened the first one. Skimming the first page, he found Preacher's writing style to be entertaining, yet thought-provoking.

How could someone who had survived the trials that Preacher had, have such a loving and forgiving attitude towards those who'd harmed him? The answer was here in John's hands. Paul Blackwell allowed God's love to fill him and overflow to those around him. That's what came through in his writing; that's what John remembered most about Preacher.

Later that night, John's restless sleep was interrupted by dreams of a cave, a comforting fire, and then chaos.

France, 1944

The gloaming light was fading, leaving deep shadows behind. Saunders glanced at his watch, squinting in the dim light, then lifted the binoculars back to his eyes. The squad had reached the outskirts of the village an hour earlier, only to find their way across the bridge and into town blocked by a burned-out jeep. They'd burrowed into the thick underbrush along the riverbank, waiting and watching.

The Germans had moved what looked like an entire battalion into the town, with dozens of pieces of heavy equipment, artillery, tanks, half-tracks and troop carriers. Villagers were noticeably absent from the streets—were they in hiding, or had they fled before the advancing enemy? How much warning had they had? Where were Doc and Preacher?

Saunders was trying to formulate a plan to rescue the pair, but the odds of the rest of the squad being captured or killed before finding them were formidable. He sighed and rubbed his eyes.

"Sarge, look!" whispered Cajé. "Someone's coming!"

The NCO's head jerked up and his eyes narrowed as he watched a man in a brown cassock scurrying along the opposite riverbank. The man's repeated glances toward the main street were like a nervous tic. His head swiveled back and forth so much that it looked like it was being unscrewed from his shoulders. His furtive path kept him in the cover of the dense growth along the edge of the river.

"Cajé," Saunders' urgent whisper cut through the silence. "Follow him, see if you can cross the stream without him seeing you. Find out where he's going. If he's the priest, he might know where Doc and Preacher are!"

"Right, Sarge," the scout acknowledged, already moving through the brush. He was the hunter now, a big cat stalking its quarry. He slid into the river and floated toward the opposite bank, holding his Garand above his chest. He pulled himself out of the water, pausing as the tiny ripples settled and smoothed on the surface of the river, then he disappeared into the shadows. No sound marked his pursuit except the soft exhalation of his breath.



At the bend in the river, Cajé paused and listened. The priest's hurried footsteps shuffling through the dry leaves and twigs had gone silent, and the scout thought he

heard voices. Easing his way forward, he leaned against the trunk of a large tree, his slight form blending in with the rough bark in the darkness. His eyes, accustomed to the deep bayou nights, could make out a shadow blacker than the surrounding night. He guessed it must be the opening to a cave. The priest had disappeared from view, but the rustling of leaves alerted the scout to his presence nearby.

Caje's patience was rewarded when three forms emerged from the deepest blackness.

"This way," he heard the priest whisper. "We must hurry before I am missed from evening prayers."

The three forms passed so close that the vigilant scout felt the rough fabric of the priest's cassock brush against his hand.

"Doc, Preacher," he hissed.

The three forms froze.

"It's me, Caje," the scout whispered. "We've been looking for you. The rest of the squad is at the river across from the town. We've got to get out of here. Battalion is going to start shelling the town in a few minutes! Let's go!"

"Mon Dieu," the priest gasped. "We must go. Quickly!"

He gathered the hem of his robe and splashed across the river. The soldiers followed and, water dripping from their jackets, raced through the trees toward the town. As they neared the bridge, Caje took the lead, signaling the others to stop. The three ducked down against the bank of the river, hidden behind bushes from curious German eyes. Caje crept forward until he could see the outline of Kirby's BAR.

"Kirby, over here!" he whispered.

The barrel of the BAR whipped around, aimed straight at the scout, and ready to erupt with deadly fire at the slightest provocation.

"Caje, is that you?" Kirby whispered back.

"Yeah, I found Doc and Preacher!"

"Sarge'll be glad to hear that. Where are they?" Kirby raised up into a crouch from his prone position.

"Boy, are we glad to see you guys!" Doc declared as he and Preacher edged out of the overgrowth. "We kinda got ourselves into a pickle here."

"Hey, Sarge," Preacher said. "This is Father Dominic. He's had us hidden from the Krauts all day. We owe him."

"Yeah, well, you'll have to pay him back some other time. We gotta move!" Saunders growled. "The shelling is about to start any minute now, and if we don't get outta here, we're gonna be caught by our own artillery!"

"Father Dominic, what about you? You can't go back now," Preacher declared. Concern for the priest's safety shone on his face. "Can he come with us, Sarge?"

"Can he keep up?" Saunders asked.

"Oh, Sarge, that's not a problem, believe me!" Doc laughed.

"Okay, then let's move!"

They scuttled away from the river, crawling through the brush, just as the first 108's started falling into the town. The night sky lit up with fire, and golden red flames spiraled into the air. Shell after shell shrieked overhead, landing with earth-shaking explosions. Showers of sparks reached for the stars and were lost among the galaxies. Geysers of dust choked the atmosphere, and cascades of water erupted from the river.

All pretense of stealth was lost as the men made a mad scramble away from the town. They were pursued by screams of pain and fear, and sounds of ripping metal and shattering glass. Rubble rained down on them; shrapnel sang past them as they ran. Finally, exhausted and breathless, they collapsed in a heap a mile outside of town.

"Littlejohn, radio!" Saunders gasped.

Littlejohn unstrapped the heavy box from his back and handed it to the NCO. Father Dominic stood, silhouetted against the glowing night sky, and watched the town burn in the distance.

"At least my people are safe in the hills," he sighed as he crossed himself. He turned to Sergeant Saunders. "I will go to them now. They are waiting for me."

Saunders watched as Doc and Preacher stood and embraced the priest. None of them spoke—words couldn't adequately express the emotions of the last three days. With a final handclasp, the priest turned and began his solitary journey back to his flock.



"Okay, saddle up," Saunders said. "We've got a long way to go and we're not out of the woods yet. Battalion isn't done shelling—they're going to walk the shelling this way. They think the Krauts are going to try to attack our lines tonight. We're stuck in the middle. We need to hightail it back before we're caught again. Cajé, take the point."

"Right, Sarge," the scout said.

The crack of a single rifle shot startled the men, and they fell back to the ground, hugging the dirt in defensive positions. Sarge crawled to where Cajé lay huddled behind a rock.

"Did you see anything?" he whispered.

"No, Sarge," the private whispered back. "But it sounded like it came from over there."

Cajé pointed in the direction the priest had taken just minutes earlier.

A faint cry drifted toward them from that direction.

"Don't shoot... I'm unarmed... I'm a priest...."

Schmeisser fire choked off the priest's words. Doc crawled over the rough ground to Saunders.

"Sarge, he's hurt. Let me go get him!"

"No, Doc, you're not going out there. We need to get out of here."

"But Sarge...."

"Doc, I said no, now let's move!" Saunders barked.

Preacher slid over next to Doc. "Sarge, I'll go with him to cover him. We can't just leave Father Dominic out there alone. Please, Sarge! He saved our lives! And the Krauts don't know we're here. We can surprise them."

Saunders tried to ignore the pleading in the men's voices. His instinct was to get his men to safety, but common decency dictated that they try to help the priest who had protected two of his men at the risk of his own life. He sighed and ran grimy fingers through hair stiff with sweat before reseating his helmet firmly on his head.

"Okay, but we don't know what we're running into over there. Cajé, take the right flank. Kirby, left flank. Doc and Preacher, stick together and see if you can find the priest. The rest of us will try to circle them and take them from the rear. If it looks like too many to fight, we leave the priest and get our tails outta there, got it?" he ordered.

Preacher nodded. "Thanks, Sarge," he said.

"Don't thank me yet," Saunders replied. "We may have bitten off more than we can chew."

"Hey, Preacher," Kirby whispered. "You got a prayer for this?"

"Yeah, Kirby, I sure do, and I already said it," Preacher grinned.

"Let's go!" Sarge said as he started forward. "Keep low, keep quiet, and don't bunch up!"

The men spread out and began their slow forward movement, crouching and darting between trees and rocks. The terrain was rugged, and they were on a slight upward slope. Saunders, Billy and Littlejohn worked their way around the knoll, intending to come up from the back side. Tiny pebbles, dislodged from shallow beds, rattled down the hillock, gathering momentum and taking more debris with them.

Caje, sure-footed as always, eeled his way to the top of the slope, where he lifted his head cautiously above the horizon. The priest was on the flat top of the mound, lying motionless on the ground. The scout couldn't tell if he was alive or dead. About fifty yards beyond the priest, moonlight glinted off the barrel of a machine gun. Caje noted the restless movements of at least six German soldiers hidden in a shallow depression.

He turned to signal the others just as a flare shot into the air and banished the night. Chaos erupted when the single word, "Fire!" was shouted from the depression. The flare faded, leaving them in darkness again, but tracer bullets from the machine gun arced and raced toward them with deadly accuracy. The barrel of the German gun glowed red, a beacon guiding Caje's return fire.

Kirby had eased his way around the left flank, but his only cover was a scrawny bush. He flattened himself into the stony ground and extended the bipod supports of his BAR. Then, scrunching in behind the bush, he opened fire, cutting across the Krauts' position and sending spurts of dirt into the air.

Under cover of the crossfire from Caje's Garand and Kirby's BAR, Doc and Preacher slithered toward Father Dominic. The priest lay on his back, one leg tucked under him. He was fingering his crucifix and silently muttering a prayer. The soldiers each grabbed him under one arm and started dragging him toward the slope.

"Where ya hurt, Father?" Doc shouted over the dissonance of multiple firing weapons.

"Ah, I am not hurt. Just my pride. They shot my wooden leg right out from under me!" the priest grumbled. "I could not run, I could not even walk. And I refused to crawl in front of the Bosch!" he declared.

"Well, if I were you, I'd start crawling now!" Doc grinned. "I'm going back down the hill, and you're coming with me."

Preacher watched as Doc and the priest slid back downhill. Father Dominic's cassock kept getting in the way as he tried to crawl, and in disgust the priest finally bunched it up and lifted it above his hips. His disfigured leg was fully exposed. The prosthesis, attached at the knee, had been shot and broken above the ankle, and lay at an awkward angle, with the shoe still attached.

Sarge crept up the backside of the hill and signaled Billy and Littlejohn to stay low. They flattened themselves and watched as Saunders pulled the pin on a grenade. The metallic "click" of the handle releasing was lost in the bedlam breaking out around them. The NCO crouched and released the grenade into the air, then pulled another from his belt and repeated the motion. Simultaneous explosions rocked the hill, and the GI's ducked from flying shrapnel and rocks.

Preacher was the first to reach the machinegun nest. He crested the top of the depression and aimed his rifle downward. The sharp report of a German rifle was the only sound in the sudden quiet following the explosions. The GI grunted and was thrown backwards. He tumbled down the slope, loosing a shower of scree. Even before the private had come to a halt, Saunders' tommygun had silenced the lone survivor of the grenade blasts.

Caje raced down the hill and knelt next to the injured man.

"Doc, Preacher's been shot!" he cried.

The medic had been assessing the priest, but his head whipped around at Caje's words. He scrambled over to Preacher, and his practiced eye knew in an instant that the wound was life-threatening. Blood spurted from a hole in Preacher's chest, and his field jacket was already soaked. Doc's hands shook as he fumbled with a dressing, pressing it tightly to the injury.

"Caje, help me roll him. I need to see his back," Doc gasped.

The Cajun pulled Preacher over, and Doc cringed when he saw the gaping exit wound. More blood spilled, and the dirt under Preacher had already turned to rusty mud. Doc pulled another dressing from his bag and pressed it to the hole in Preacher's back. Then he pressed another, and another against the free-flowing injuries.

"Hand me a hemostat, Caje." Doc held out one hand while keeping pressure on the injury with the other.

Silently, the scout slapped the instrument into Doc's outstretched hand. He watched as Doc, by the light of the moon, tried to staunch the flow of blood. Father Dominic hopped over on his good leg and sat at Preacher's head, praying softly and making the sign of the cross.

"How is he, Doc?" The medic looked up at Saunders and shook his head.

"He's real bad, Sarge. I don't know if he's gonna make it." Sorrow deepened Doc's Arkansas accent. "I'm tryin' to stop the bleedin', but...." His voice trailed off as he continued his frantic ministrations.

The rest of the squad had gathered around the wounded soldier. Kirby held a torch, casting a feeble light into Doc's field. Finally, the bleeding slowed, and the medic sprinkled sulfa powder on the injuries.

"Can he be moved?" Sarge asked. "The shelling is going to start again any time."

As though on command, mortars whistled overhead, followed seconds later by fiery explosions near the town.

"Doc, we don't have much time. Can he be moved?" Sarge snapped.

"No, Sarge, if he moves, he'll start bleeding again. I don't think I can stop it a second time."

"Then we need to get him into some cover," Saunders sighed. "We'll have to leave him here and come back for him when the shelling is over. Battalion is sending up a platoon after the shelling—we'll hook up with them and pick him up then."

"But, Sarge...." Shock rippled across Doc's face.

"No buts, Doc. We knew the risk when we went up that hill. He can't move and we can't stay here. Let's go!" Saunders couldn't let his distress at leaving one of his men behind put the others in jeopardy.

"Sergeant, I will stay with him," the priest said. "I cannot run anyway, and I would just be a burden to your men."

"Father Dominic, you've gotta come with us," Doc cried. "You'll be killed if you stay here!"



"No, I will stay with Paul. I know something of medicine, I can help him. My hands are good, even if my leg is not."

Saunders looked around them at the terrain.

"Okay, dig in at the lowest point," he ordered. "We'll dig a foxhole for Preacher and the priest. They'll be all right until we can get back to them."

The men made quick work of shoveling, and Cajé and Doc gently laid Preacher in the bottom of the foxhole. Preacher's eyes fluttered open and he saw Doc's face hovering over him.

"Doc," he whispered. "I forgot to give you back your Bible." His weak hand reached toward his pocket, but then dropped back to his side. "Can you get it out for me?"

"Sure," Doc said. "But why don't you keep it for now? I'll get it back from you next time I see you." Doc placed the small book in Preacher's hand. The wounded man was already unconscious again.

The medic reached into his rucksack and removed a syringe of morphine. He handed it to Father Dominic.

"If he comes around again, give him this," he instructed.

"C'mon, Doc, let's go!" Sarge ordered. Then, turning to the priest, he said, "We'll be back in a couple of hours with help."

Missouri, USA, 1984

John stood on the sidewalk, gazing up at the imposing facade of the stately old ivy-covered church. The heavy oak doors were open, inviting worshipers to come inside. The morning service had already begun, but a few stragglers still climbed the worn stone steps. The fall day was beautiful, the air crisp and clean, but the storm raging in John's soul blinded him to the vibrant fall foliage.

"Maybe we should wait until after the service," John said, turning away from the church. "We don't want to interrupt the sermon." A note of doubt had crept into his voice and frown lines settled on his forehead.

"You've wasted forty years, why waste another minute?" his wife asked. "Isn't this what you've been working toward for the last three weeks? Isn't this what's been consuming your every waking thought? Isn't it time to put your nightmares to rest?"

"But what if he hates me? What if he's angry with me for leaving him behind?"

"If he hated you, he wouldn't have written that letter. Forty years is a long time to carry a grudge anyway, especially for a preacher."

She took his trembling hand in hers and led him up the steps and through the open door. They slipped into the last pew unnoticed as the pastor led the congregation in prayer. John's eyes were drawn to the pulpit, to the man whose gentle voice intoned the Lord's blessing on the congregation. Stooped and gray-haired, face scarred and twisted, the man bore little resemblance to the Preacher of John's memories.

The voice, though... the voice was the same. It reflected an inner peace and serenity that belied the outward appearance. John could hear in the voice the same petition for blessings on the squad of forty years earlier. All doubt was suddenly gone from his mind. This was the right thing to do, he knew that now. After the service, he would reintroduce himself to Preacher.

"Amen."

Papers rustled as the congregants settled themselves in the pews and prepared for the sermon.

"Our text for today is found in the book of Philippians." Rev. Blackwell turned the pages of a small, worn Bible. John felt his breath catch in his chest as he recognized the slim volume. His mind flashed back to the foxhole, and he saw himself placing that same book in Preacher's weak hand. Blood thundered in his ears and he barely heard as the pastor read the Scripture passage.

"I want you to understand, brothers, that the things which happened to me happened for the furtherance of the gospel... many brothers in the Lord became confident by my bonds... for to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain... rejoice in the Lord always... the peace of God will keep your hearts and minds..."

"Ladies and gentlemen, today I want to tell you a story... a story about a young man fighting a war. It was a war against tyranny and oppression, against sin and godlessness. The man often felt that he was fighting the war alone, that even those on 'his side' were against him. He was captured by the enemy, wounded, beaten and held in chains. And yet he had only love and forgiveness in his heart for those who wished him ill. He understood that whatever happened to him was for the furtherance of God's plan...."

Rev. Blackwell paused as he scanned the faces of the congregation.

"This man's name was Paul." He chuckled as he continued. "Yes, I was named for him. And I guess you could say that my life at one time paralleled his—fighting a battle against tyranny and oppression, wounded, captured by the enemy, beaten, held in chains. And like him, what happened to me was for the furtherance of the Gospel."

His scarred face contorted into the semblance of a smile as he gazed fondly at his flock. They knew his story well; he had made no secret of his war history. His sermons were frequently peppered with illustrations from his own past. They knew through him that it *is* possible to love your enemies, to forgive those who've wronged you, to strive to rise above the petty squabbles of day-to-day life. His very existence was a living testimony to God's power.

John's sharp intake of breath startled those around him. He gripped the back of the pew in front of him, and his nails dug into the wood. His face was pale and sheened with sweat. People nearby turned and looked at him, and wondered if he was ill. His wife pried one of his hands free and squeezed it, but he remained tensed and rigid. The small disturbance caught the attention of the minister, who was speaking again.

"One who stood with Paul on the side of right was a man named John...." His voice trailed off as his eyes locked with John's in the back row.

A sob escaped John's lips. His wife put a consoling hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off as he struggled to his feet. Tears welled in his eyes and spilled over onto his ashen face. He stumbled into the aisle and stood swaying, legs splayed for balance.

"Preacher..." John cried. Words failed him. "Preacher, I..."

Unable to continue, John hung his head as sobs shook him.

The thump-thump of a cane hitting the floor near him startled John, and he looked up into the piercing blue eyes that had haunted him for so long. Rev. Blackwell stood in front of him, holding the cane in one hand and the small Bible in the other.

"I think this belongs to you, Doc," the minister said softly as he held the Bible out. "I kept it for you. I thought you were dead."

Doc, awed, raised a hesitant hand and touched the Bible reverently.

"You kept it?" he whispered.

Preacher nodded. "It reminded me of you. Of what a good man you were. Of how I owed you my life."

"But..." Doc stopped.

"When I came to in the German field hospital, Father Dominic was with me. They let him stay to tend to me—it took some of the burden off the medics there. He told me

what happened that night, how you stopped the bleeding and told Sarge I couldn't be moved. He said that the Americans were overrun that night and none of you made it back. We thought you'd all been killed or captured. After the war, I wrote you a letter, but when I didn't get an answer, I thought my worst fears were true—that you were dead. I lived with that burden for forty years until today. It was my fault you went to that town with me, it was my fault we were caught on that hill. If I hadn't talked Sarge into letting us go back for Father Dominic, none of that would have happened."

"No!" Doc shook his head. "No! It was MY fault for leaving you there. I should have stayed with you! I thought you were dead all these years. That letter never reached me until three weeks ago. I'm so sorry for leaving you in that foxhole. I tried to save you, but I thought you died that night!"

Doc's voice faded, but both he and Preacher murmured, "I thought you were dead," as they fell into a tearful embrace. Doc's sobs turned to laughter when Preacher turned and announced to the congregation, "That concludes this morning's service. Please greet your neighbors and friends on the way out. And don't bunch up!"

Preacher turned back to Doc. "Looks like we have forty years of catching up to do, Doc! Let me tell you... Father Dominic went back and rebuilt his church again, and last I heard he was a cardinal in the French Catholic church. And guess who stops in here every now and again to say hi and give a contribution? Ol' William G. himself. Yep—he's an over-the-road trucker—supposed to retire this year. Whenever he's out this way, he just pops over and catches a service. Says he loves the way I pray! And Sarge... well... let me tell you about Chip...."

end