

THE TELEGRAM

by CCK
kjones4@peoplepc.com



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Hey, big brother,

Hope this finds you safe and well. I know I haven't written as much lately, but school has been a bear. Thought I'd use this letter to let you know what all's been going on in your little sister's life. I'm sure you're probably getting tired of the same old 'we're all fine, hope you are too' letter. So, for the next week I'm going to give you an inside look at my life as mom and I impatiently wait for you, Joey and Chris to come home.

Monday,

I started school bright and early. Cheerleader try outs were this afternoon and I wanted to get some practice in before I had to perform. Cindy, my best friend, and I worked our backsides off and felt we were ready. We both felt confident after our try outs, but tomorrow will tell us if we made it.

I hate my math teacher. We all do, actually. Not only does he give us TONS of homework, but he pulled a pop quiz on us today. I just know I flunked it. Mom will KILL me when she finds out.

Well, that's it for today, more tomorrow.



Sergeant Chip Saunders entered the make-shift office of his lieutenant. Hanley studied the maps covering his desk and Saunders knew they would be heading out once again.

"Lieutenant, you wanted to see me?"

"Oh, Saunders, yes I did." Hanley glanced up briefly. "You're going back into Delta sector."

"Delta sector? I thought that had already been cleared?"

"It had, but new reports are coming in that there is a German advance trying to move back in. We just need your squad to confirm those reports. Do not engage the enemy if at all possible."

"Got it, Lieutenant. When do we leave?"

"Oh-six-hundred tomorrow. Make sure your men get a hot meal tonight."

"Yes, sir." Saunders turned and left the office, letting a deep sigh leave his lips.



Tuesday,

I passed, I passed! Man, I can't believe it. What a load off my mind. I actually got a C if you can believe it. I just couldn't imagine facing Mom if I'd failed.

Cindy and I also made the cheerleading squad. So, your little sister will get to go to all the games and spend time with the football team. Now don't get all upset, Goon, I promise to behave. Not that I could get away with much with Mom around--you of all people should know that. Practice starts tomorrow, so I'll let you know how it goes.



The squad gathered at the edge of town the next morning and headed out for their objective. Caje once again took the lead, his skills as a scout without question, as Saunders covered the rear. It took a good portion of the day to reach the area Hanley had spoke of.

Cautiously they entered the region reported to have German movement. It was densely populated with tall trees that formed a canopy, allowing little light to reach the ground.

Even though it was mid day and the sun sat high in the sky, it felt like dusk. This put the entire squad on edge. Shadows seemed to dance behind every tree and bush.

Kirby watched as Yates, only eighteen and fresh from the repple depple, swung his rifle from side to side at every shadow and fluctuation of light. He placed a hand on the young private's shoulder. "Take a deep breath, kid," he whispered. "We're going to be fine. Germans moved out of here a long time ago."

"But...but, they said the Germans were moving back in."

"No proof on that, kid. That's what we're here for, to show that those so-called intelligent officers they don't know as much as they think they do. Keep a sharp eye, but relax that grip on your M-1. You don't want to shoot one of us because we moved wrong, do you?" Kirby patted Yates on the back with a smile and then moved up behind Caje.

Yates took a deep breath, a breath that he never let out. Gunfire erupted all around the squad, along with a loud yell of, 'TAKE COVER!' Only Yates remained still, hearing nothing and looking bewildered at the hole where his chest used to be. His knees buckled and he hit the ground face first, never having taken another breath.

Caje and Kirby scrambled behind a boulder while Littlejohn and Billy jumped behind a large fallen tree. Doc immediately ran to Yates' side, bullets striking the ground and zipping all around him. As he turned the young soldier over, the sight before him twisted his stomach and he realized nothing could be done. Something suddenly hit him from behind and he found himself rolling over and over, and then stopping abruptly.

"Dammit, Doc, are you trying to get yourself killed?" Saunders' voice came out of the darkness of the bush.

"Yates was down. I had to check him."

"Yates was dead before he hit the ground. It wasn't worth the risk."

Saunders pushed Doc further back before grabbing his Tommy gun and rolling to the edge.

"Now, I'm giving you a direct order, Doc. Stay here, do not come out for ANY reason. I don't care what happens, you stay here! GOT IT?"

Saunders turned and took off running. Doc watched as his sergeant dodged gun fire and dove into another area of brush a few feet away. The gunfire grew louder as Saunders' Tommy gun was added to the mix. Doc thought about the last order he was given, knowing in his heart if he heard the call for a medic he would once again ignore that order. Doc also knew his sergeant, in his own heart, knew exactly the same thing.



Wednesday,

Well, here mom and I sit in front of the fireplace as the day draws to a close. I can't help but wonder if you are warm and safe as I write this letter. Do you have any chance to sit warm and comfortable and think of home? I know mom and I think of you every minute of every day.



So, it was my first day of cheerleader practice and it was more fun than I ever could have imagined. It was a lot of hard work but well worth it. We do our workouts during football practice, so I've gotten to meet most the football team. The captain of the team's name is Scott and he's such a dreamboat. He is also kind and sweet, a perfect gentleman. I would love to go out with him, but I doubt that is going to happen. See, there is another girl on the team who is just throwing herself at Scott. It's disgusting to see the way she flirts, tossing her hair every time he's near by. She thinks she's the cat's meow.

Mom went to BINGO last night and won \$20.00. She was so excited. She says she's going to put it back in the cookie jar so she'll have everything she'll need to make a special meal when all her boys come home. SO, you better make sure you come home. You don't want to get on Mom's bad side do you?



The battle raged into the night, but in the darkness, without even the smallest bit of moonlight to their advantage, both sides ceased fire. With the sun's rising, the battle would start anew.

Saunders made his way to each member of his squad, explaining his next strategies. Before dawn they would make their way around the Germans, and one by one, slip past them. It was imperative that Hanley be informed of the enemy presence in this sector. Each member of the squad knew the chances were slim that all of them would make it out, but one just might. And for that man, there was no looking back. No waiting for anyone else.

Caje was the first to go. He moved silent and sure. Billy would follow with Doc close behind. Kirby would come next with Littlejohn a few moments later. Saunders thoughts leaned toward his over-sized private. If anyone was going to make noise and be discovered it would likely be him. By choosing this order he was sure most of his squad would make it back, though he would not admit this.

Saunders covered his squad's retreat. It didn't matter if he made it out, only that the report got to Hanley.

Hanley stood in the doorway of the platoon headquarters and watched as the clouds slowly moved across the sky. His eyes riveted on the path. Twelve hours and Saunders and his squad had not returned. Hanley could feel that particular pressure at the base of his skull, the one telling him he was in for a hell of a headache.

"Lieutenant."

"What is it, Brockmeyer?"

"We've got a report from the outer sentries. They just cleared a member of First Squad through their post. He's on his way here."

"A member? What about the rest of the squad?"

Hanley felt a knot form in his stomach at the shake of Brockmeyer's head. He looked down the path to see Caje jogging towards him.

"Lieutenant..." Caje worked to get the word out, his hands braced on his knees as he fought to catch his breath. "German patrol encountered in Delta section. Looks like the reports are accurate this time."

"Brockmeyer," Hanley called over his shoulder, his eyes never leaving the scout. "Radio HQ. They've been preparing an artillery barrage for the area. They were just waiting for the final report."

"Artillery barrage, how soon sir?"

"Immediately." Hanley looked towards the road Caje had come down. "Where is the rest of First Squad?"

"Not sure, if Sarge's plan worked, hopefully they are right behind me." Caje's breathing finally evened out.

"What plan?"



"We got pinned down. We lost Yates right off. Once the sun went down, we couldn't even see our hands in front of our faces. Sarge knew at first light they would start up again, this time probably wiping us out. His first objective was to get the report back to you at all cost. He figured the best way to insure that would be to have us leave, one at a time, before sun up. He thought we could sneak past the patrol in the dark. If one of us could make it, that was all that mattered. So I left first, ten minutes later Billy, and so on. Hopefully, I'm not the only one to make it."

Hanley nodded his understanding, his stomach twisting in knots.

"Has anyone else got back yet, sir?" Caje could see by the look on his lieutenant's face he was the first. Now it was Caje's stomach that was twisted in knots.



Thursday,

Well, Chip, another pop quiz today. This one was in American history, but this one I was ready for. It was tough, but I think I aced it.

Oh, and you're never going to believe this. I got to talk to Scott today. I couldn't believe it when he came over and stopped to talk with me. Melissa, that's the girl I told you about that was throwing herself at him, well, she was just GREEN with envy. Her whole face just scrunched up with anger before she whirled and stormed off. Scott just ignored her little fit and kept his attention on me. I told you he was a complete gentleman.



"I need that information now, Sergeant." Hanley yelled into the phone that sat on his desk. "It's been over thirty-six hours since Saunders and his squad left on their mission, and over twenty-four since their scout returned with the report of German movements. Now, get off your ass and get me what I need!" The lieutenant slammed the hand set onto its cradle and lowered his head onto his hands.

He thought back over that twenty-four hour period when First Squad had returned, one by one. All but one...

First Billy had arrived, completely out of breath. It was obvious he had run the entire way. Doc followed within two hours, but it would take most of the rest of the day for the last two to show up. As the sun began to sink behind the western horizon, a silhouette appeared at the end of the road. Hanley and the three members of First Squad watched as it drew closer, becoming more defined. The figure soon morphed from shadow to Littlejohn, who was all but dragging Kirby.

Doc raced to their side, pulling Kirby's other arm over his shoulder.

"I think his ankle's broke, Doc." Littlejohn tightened his grip on Kirby's waist. "I found him about half way back here. He'd fallen into what looked like a...a grave."

"It was covered with pine branches." Kirby hissed in pain as Littlejohn and Doc sat him down and elevated his foot. "Never saw it, fell in at a full run. Knew I busted something."

"It took me a while to get him out and then it was slow going getting back." Littlejohn stretched to get the kinks out of his back.

"Either of you see any sign of Saunders out there?" Hanley stepped into the circle of men.

"No, sir." Littlejohn looked toward Kirby, who also shook his head. "We were hoping he made it back before us."



A knock drew Hanley back from his thoughts. He looked up as the door opened and Caje entered his office.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant, I wanted to inform you that the remainder of Saund...Uh...the squad is ready to leave."

"How is Private Kirby?" Hanley asked, ignoring Caje's statement.

"He'll be fine sir. The doctor said it was a clean break. He'll be off his feet for about 6 weeks."

"I'm sure that won't be a problem for him." Hanley gave a sad smile.

"He's not very happy at the moment. He wants to go with us, but the doc won't allow it."

"You won't be going either, Caje." Hanley lowered his head and turned away from the scout.

"Wh... What do you mean, 'we won't be leaving'? What about Sarge? He's still out there, probably injured. We can't just leave him."

"That area is still being shelled, Caje." Hanley spoke with a crestfallen voice as he looked down at the papers on his desk. The duty roster lay in front of him, Saunders' name with the letters MIA in bold print beside it. "No one can get in there."

"We're ready and willing--"

"I'm not willing to loose any more men on a fool's quest," Hanley interrupted angrily. His voice then softened, his face etched with grief. "Caje, the chances of Saunders still being alive are slim to none. You do realize that, don't you?"

"NO SIR, I don't! What I do know is that if anyone could survive it will be Sarge."



Friday,

Well Chip, I made it through another week of school. As usual, our math teacher has loaded our weekend with homework. I got a lot of it done tonight as I have a game tomorrow. The first of the season, so keep your fingers crossed that we win. I can't wait to see Scott again. He's such a dream.

Mom made all your favorite foods tonight. We had stuffed pork chops in your honor, broccoli with cheese sauce in Joey's honor, and triple chocolate cake for desert in Chris' honor. She tried real hard to hide the tears as she dished it up. She really misses you. She misses all three of you boys, so you better keep yourself safe over there and get home soon.



It hurt to move, to breathe. Hell, he swore it hurt to think.

Saunders knew he was still hidden in the same bush he and Doc had taken shelter under. Judging from the pain in his side and smell of copper, he knew he was wounded and losing blood. His thoughts cleared and he remembered his squad, their leaving one by one in the cover of darkness. He remembered holding his breath every time someone left, waiting for the sound of gunfire -- gunfire that never came, until it was his turn...

The sun had just been peeking over the horizon when he'd begun to make his way around the German patrol. His men had made it free and clear, that was all that mattered. Maybe, just maybe, he'd thought that he, too, would escape undetected. After all, he'd beaten the odds before. He could do it again. Or, would fate finally be waiting around the corner?



A single gunshot broke the absolute stillness of the dawn, and then unbelievable pain had shot through his side, slammed him to the ground. Moments later, he heard the German shooter searching,

trying to verify the hit. In desperation, he lay as if dead, trying, but unable, to catch his breath. Biting back against the pain of his wound, he barely managed to keep from crying out as he'd begun to slowly, and quietly move. And then his breath caught as an enemy soldier walked past, mere feet from where he leaned against some bushes.

Somehow, he crawled back to the place he and Doc had hidden in and succumbed to the unbearable pain in his side until, mercifully, he slipped into blessed darkness...

Now, with the memory of those events becoming more and clearer, he wondered how many times he had lost consciousness. How long had he been here? Had he missed a sunrise, or a sunset? Had he missed more than one? He didn't know. He just simply didn't know.



Saturday,

Well, Chip, here I sit on a beautiful Saturday morning writing this letter as mom cooks us breakfast. I love the smell of bacon in the morning and you remember mom always knows just how we like it.

I can't help but sit here and wonder what kind of breakfast you're eating over there, if any. I keep these thoughts to myself of course, because I don't want mom worrying any more than she already does.

Okay, mom just served up breakfast so I best eat before it gets cold. You know how mom gets. I'll write some more as after our game. Be back soon.

WE WON, WE WON. What a great game. We beat the other team 28 to 3. Scott was AMAZING. The other team didn't stand a chance.

The whole gang went to the soda shop afterwards and Mom let me go with them. Can you believe it? Of course, I had to be home before dark, which was okay as I still had homework to finish. Scott said he might stop by after church tomorrow so he can meet mom. Oh, I SO hope he does.



Saunders slowly opened his eyes, thanking God that he'd survived the shelling and silently praying that it would not begin again.

He hadn't heard any movement of any kind for what seemed like a very long time. Maybe that meant the German patrol had either pulled out or were dead.

Saunders had a fleeting thought of trying to make his way back. But the slightest movement sent raging agony through his body and consequently, his mind started to shut down in order to block out the pain. He doubted he could make it back to the American lines alone and that thought seemed so absurd that he found it oddly funny.

He started to laugh. The harder he tried to stop, the more he laughed until he feared he was becoming hysterical.

He stopped as a renewed wave of nauseating discomfort plagued him. He felt blood tickling down his side again, soaking the ground beneath him. Grabbing his last bandage, he pressed it to his side, and placed it on top of the saturated one tied around his waist.

Saunders wondered now if this was the end. Would he die here, alone, slowly and methodically bleeding to death? His eyes were closing one tiny degree at a time as he fought to hang on. His thoughts began drifting homeward, to his mother and sister. What were they doing right now? Was it dinner time and they sat at the family table enjoying one of his mom's home-cooked meals? Lord, how he missed her cooking! Maybe they were getting ready for bed.



Perhaps they were snuggled safe and warm in front of a roaring fire, Louise doing her homework, and his mother crocheting some article of clothing for one of her sons. A sob caught in his throat at the thought that he would never again join his family in such simple activities. How would his family handle the news of his death? It would be hard on Louise, yes, she was so young, but his mom, would she survive losing a son?

The realization hit him that he would never move far enough or fast enough; he *would* die here, lost and alone. Even if the Americans could get back into this area, they would never find him in his hiding place, and yet he knew his squad would never give up if they had any chance of looking for him. He considered trying to let the Germans know he was there, if they came back. He thought it might be better to spend the rest of the war in a P.O.W. camp than dead, but then again there was no guarantee that they would let him live if they found him. No, his life would end here and now, but at least his squad made it out. That was all that mattered. His eyes continued their downward slide for what he was sure would be the last time.



Sunday,

Mom and I went to church today. We lit a candle and spent an hour after services praying for each of you boys. We do that every Sunday, it seems to help us cope with your absence.

Got all my homework finished and now I'm waiting to see if Scott is going to make it by to meet mother. I really hope he does.

Well, Chip, time to close out this letter and even though it's Sunday I want to get it down to the mailbox. That way it will be on its way to you first thing Monday morning. You take care of yourself and come home soon. Mom and I miss you more and more every day.

Love

The Brat, Louise

Louise folded her letter, placed it in an envelope and sealed it with a kiss. After affixing a stamp to one corner, she jumped off her bed. If she left now, she could get to the mail box at the end of the block and return before dark. Reaching for her sweater, she raced from her room just when the doorbell rang. Hoping against hope that it was Scott, she bound down the stairs, only to suddenly halt when she saw two uniformed men standing in the doorway.

"Mom?"

Her mother slowly turned and faced her, tears coursing down her face.

Louise looked from her mother to the two men; she saw a look of sorrow and pity in their eyes.

"Mom?"

Her heart beating so rapidly she thought it would surely burst, Louise started down one step at a time. Her mother was speaking to her, but she couldn't hear her, so harsh was the sound of her own heartbeat, pounding like a drum in her ears.

"It's Chip," her mother cried. "He's gone."

A dreadful emptiness gripped Louise, knotting her stomach, and stealing away her breath. Her world spiraled down around her, causing her to grow dizzy in the abyss of darkness that tunneled before her. "NO!" She sank onto the stairs. "NONONONONO!"

"Louise!" her mother cried. But Louise could not hear over her own screaming.

"NO, NO, NO, NO, NO!!"

"Louise!" Rose called again as she shook her daughter. "Louise, wake up sweetheart."

Louise bolted straight up in bed, her eyes flying open, her breathing coming in short gasps.

Rose Saunders sat on the side of the bed and pulled her daughter tightly against her. "It's okay, honey. It was just a dream."

Louise forced her breathing to slow as tears sprang to her eyes. "Oh, mother," she cried. "I dreamed we got a telegram saying Chip was gone. It was so real. I thought I would just die."

Mother and daughter remained together for a long time, rocking gently back and forth, back and forth, holding one another tightly against the fears they both shared.

"It was just a dream, darling," her mother whispered softly, over and over again. "Chip is fine and so are you."



The Lieutenant stepped into the hospital and scanned the many cots filled with the wounded.
"Over here, Lieutenant."

Doc sat beside the cot where Saunders lay asleep. As Hanley took a seat beside the corpsman, his worried gaze scanned the bandages that encompassed his non-com's waist. "How's he doing?"

"Better," Doc stated as he wiped Saunders brow with a cool cloth. "He's running a bit of a fever, but the doctor said he should be fine."

"Has he been awake at all?" Hanley noticed how pale the man was.

"Yeah, he was for a few minutes. Dr. Williams said he'll probably sleep most of the next two days, between the blood loss and the surgery." Doc seemed deep in thought when he turned to the man sitting next to him. "You know, Lieutenant, he was reported missing in action over four days ago. I hope his family wasn't notified."

"It was close, but I was able to pull the telegram before it was sent. One more day and his mother and sister would have gotten a visit from an Army Chaplain."

"Now that would have been a nightmare."
"Yeah," Hanley sighed. "A real nightmare."



THE END