

# THE BICYCLE

By: M1



Always dust, heat, sweat... and Kirby complaining about his feet. Those were givens on any recon mission. The young sergeant cradling a Thompson submachine gun led two other American soldiers around the edge of a meadow in the late afternoon sun. His casual saunter belied his blue eyes warily scanning the area. About twenty feet to the rear, Littlejohn plodded along. He towered over his average-sized comrades, yet his gentle expression and demeanor were reminiscent of a large, friendly Labrador. Behind him, Kirby lugged a BAR, grumbling to himself, swatting at gnats and grimacing with each step.

It had been a long afternoon, longer than expected. At last the sergeant stopped and waved the other men to the shade of a large oak.



"Okay, take five." Sergeant Saunders suddenly realized just how tired he was himself, how his back and legs ached. He collapsed against the oak's trunk, then reached inside his field jacket for a well-worn map. Kirby and Littlejohn flopped down beside him.

"Yeah, sometimes I think they send us out on these recons just to see how much shoe leather they can wear out. They must have stock in the boot business." Kirby winced and pulled off his boot.

"Yeah, and Epsom salts.

Just for you," Littlejohn snorted, pulling the radio from his shoulder.

"Hey, your feet gotta be killing you, too. Man-oh-man, my dogs are barking. Look at this—look at this! I'm gonna get me a purple heart just for all the blisters I got!"

"Shut up, Kirby," Saunders said wearily. He pushed his helmet up from his forehead, squinted, and studied the map a few more seconds before refolding and stuffing it back inside his jacket. Orders to recon toward the German lines to check for signs of a counterattack turned up nothing but an old man with a sprained ankle and overturned hay cart. Helping him on his way had taken longer than expected and they would have to make time to get back to camp before dark.

"Okay, let's move...." Saunders sighed, straightened up, and reached for his Thompson. A glint in the nearby foliage caught his eye, just as wood exploded by his cheek. The shock made Littlejohn jerk upright as Kirby flailed wildly about for his boot.

"Holy—!" Kirby never finished. A torrent of shots rang out, splintering the tree behind them, boring into the dirt beneath them. Kirby and Saunders scrambled for cover behind the massive trunk while Littlejohn kicked at the ground trying to get a footing. His radio twisted in a cloud of dust, bullets piercing its metal skin. There was a short cry from Littlejohn, his comrades frantically reaching for him, then a tangle of bodies rolling down a slope to rest behind a rotted log. The men cowered under the onslaught of bullets, arms over their heads.

After a few seconds, Saunders slid closer to the shaking and hurting Littlejohn. "How is it?" he asked. Littlejohn's contorted face provided answer enough. The bullet seemed to have entered the right thigh and exited without hitting bone or major arteries. The sergeant pulled a sulfa packet from his jacket, tore it open with his teeth, and applied the powder to the wound as Kirby opened a field dressing and wound it tightly around Littlejohn's leg.

"Not bad. That should stop the bleeding. Can you shoot?"

"Sure, Sarge," said Littlejohn, trying to smile but only managing a grimace.

Saunders glanced up at the radio riddled to bits, then fired part of a round from his Thompson. A bullet ricocheted past his ear, and he ducked back down, gripping the front of his helmet.

"How many you think, Sarge?" Kirby yelled at his other side, peeking over the log.

"Enough," Saunders answered grimly and added another clip. The shooting continued, so intense that Saunders and Kirby could barely return fire.

As a lull settled upon them, Saunders peered over the top of the log, then scrunched back down on his back. They were pinned down and the ferocity of the shots made it difficult to determine just how many enemy soldiers there were. Despite his vigilance, he had walked right into an ambush. He whacked his Thompson with the palm of his hand, exasperated with himself. Sweat trickled down his face and dripped off his chin. He glanced at Kirby, who was nervously mumbling obscenities to himself, then at Littlejohn, whose gentle eyes rested directly on him. Saunders pressed the thumb of his clenched fist against his upper lip. They depended on him for their lives. It was a responsibility he accepted, but it weighed so heavily upon him—the conflict between doing his duty as a soldier and keeping his men safe. He felt much older than his twenty-odd years.

Taking a deep breath, he wiped the sweat from his brow and prepared to move. If he could get on the German flank, he would be in better firing position. "Okay, give me cover."

As he brought his knee up, a new volley of shots rang out, this time from in front of them, again tearing up the ground at their feet. A husky Teutonic voice came from the scrubby trees in front of them: "Put down your weapons! You are surrounded!"

The sergeant looked sharply at Kirby and Littlejohn, then away. He couldn't let them die here. Better to allow themselves to be captured, buy time, watch for opportunities. Moments passed. Then, without taking his eyes off of his men, he slowly raised his Thompson and began to stand, arms over his head.

"Sarge..." Kirby began to speak but followed his noncom's lead.

"Throw the weapons out!"

They dropped their weapons on the ground. Littlejohn did the same and then leaned back on his elbows.

"Up! Up!"

Saunders and Kirby straightened up, and a half-dozen Germans rushed out from the surrounding foliage and shoved them into the clearing. One kicked at Littlejohn, then again, grunting an order and motioning with his rifle.

"Hey, he's wounded, you blockhead!" yelled Kirby over his shoulder, as he tried to fight off the arms grabbing at him.

"Kirby."

One tense word was all that was needed. Kirby looked reproachfully at Saunders, but stopped protesting while soldiers ripped open his field jacket and shirt, then spun him around, disarming him.

Another one tore Saunders' jacket open, pulled his sidearm from its holster, found the battered map and held it out to his commanding officer, who was approaching from the rear. A tall, powerfully built older man, he inspected the Americans brusquely, then turned his attention to the map. Saunders studied the enemy squad. The Germans were as sweaty, dirty, and exhausted as the Americans, but seemed hurried and nervous, especially a teenager wearing a newer uniform—a young replacement, Saunders assumed.

The German officer strode over to the grimacing Littlejohn and frowned with

disgust. Then turning to face Saunders, spoke in cold, level tone. "We don't take wounded."

Both Saunders and Kirby looked up in surprise.

"Walk!" he commanded as he pushed them away. Realizing what was happening, Kirby spun around in panic. Saunders reached over, grabbing his jacket.

"That's okay," Saunders said calmly to the officer. "We'll help him walk."

The German snorted, a smirk on his face, as he noted the vast difference in the men's sizes.

"I said we'd help him."

The officer's smile faded as he saw the determination on the American sergeant's face. "Very well. You will help him. Move!"

Littlejohn let out a sigh of relief and tried to stand with difficulty as his comrades grasped him under his arms and strained under his weight.

"C'mon, Littlejohn, we'll make it," Saunders grunted.

They staggered off with difficulty, through a mass of weeds and up an embankment to a road, then continued in the direction of the German lines. The officer and two of his squad took the lead, with the Americans guarded closely by the others. After a hundred yards, Littlejohn could no longer endure hearing the labored breathing of his comrades. Straightening up, he tried to put more weight on his injured leg but moaned in pain. He closed his eyes tightly in resignation.

"Sarge, leave me, please," he pleaded.

"Shut up, Littlejohn," Saunders murmured with determination. He hitched up Littlejohn's arm on his shoulder.

"Faster!" The bark from the squad's commander brought an impatient shove from the soldier behind them.

"Awright, Kraut, take it easy!" Kirby spat out. Sweating profusely, he cocked his head toward the soldiers by their side. "Think they know something we don't know? They seem in an awful big hurry."

The Germans seemed hounded, in a hurry to get to their own lines and in no mood to deal with any more difficulties. Saunders eyed the radio being carried by the soldier in front of him. He could only assume that the battle lines had shifted and the Germans had received the information before he had. A few yards farther and the soldier moved beside the officer, allowing him to access the receiver. He spoke into the instrument without slowing his pace, while glancing at his watch, toward the sky, and back at his watch. Retrieving Saunders' map from his own jacket, he studied it, and then quickened his stride.

The Americans struggled desperately to keep up, the sun baking their backs; the dry scrubby trees on either side of the roadway offered little shade for relief. The road began to rise, making each step even more difficult. Coming around a slight curve, they passed a desolate farmhouse standing forlornly in a barren field.

Littlejohn's head began to loll. The men staggered, trying to keep him upright, but at last they could no longer continue and collapsed to the ground in a heap.

"Sarge, I can't go any further. You gotta leave me," Littlejohn panted.

The sergeant pushed himself up on his arms and shook his head, refusing to even consider abandoning one of his men.



The agitated German officer stamped back to the broken soldiers, shouting in anger, "Up! Up!" He grabbed Saunders roughly by the front of the jacket and jerked him away from the others, throwing him several feet. "This is why we don't take wounded!" he bellowed, his nerves frayed.

Saunders' eyes flashed with anger. He tried to buy time. Pushing himself to his feet, he confronted the German officer. "I said we'd help him. We just need a little time to rest...."

The older man shoved him, causing him to stagger back a few feet. Regaining his balance, Saunders turned back to speak. This time the officer used his Luger to strike him with such force that it knocked him off his feet, sending him face-down to the dirt, his helmet bouncing off on the side. The sergeant shook his head, raising himself on his forearms. The sounds around him were suddenly muffled, as if coming from the end of a long tunnel instead of from right next to him. He could hear terse instructions given and the shuffling of the soldiers falling into line. Struggling to remain conscious, Saunders focused his eyes on the glint of something at the nearby farmhouse. As his head cleared he could make out the unmistakable shape of a bicycle leaning against its front door.

"We'll help him." Saunders spoke loudly as he staggered to his feet. "We'll carry him on that bicycle." He pointed toward the building.

The German officer, surprised at the sound of his voice, swung around in annoyance and took in the determined American swaying slightly on his feet, a trickle of blood coursing through the blond stubble on his face, a dark bruise swelling his cheek. He snorted in wonder at his tenacity. Narrowing his eyes, he stared at the bicycle and frowned. At last, he motioned a soldier to retrieve the machine. It was rusted, with a slightly bent front wheel, but still serviceable. He sneered and waved it over in the direction of Kirby and Littlejohn. Saunders followed unsteadily, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth.

"I got just the thing for you, Littlejohn," he said.

A grateful grin split Littlejohn's face as he reached out for his comrades' arms and pushed up with his good leg to a standing position. Settling himself on the bicycle seat, he leaned over heavily on the handle bars while Kirby and Saunders balanced him on each side. They started off again, the German officer with two of his men in the lead and the rest of the squad walking beside the Americans, their rifles at ready.

"You okay? Try to keep your feet up," Saunders said softly as they started off again. Outwardly calm, he was still shaking inside from how close he had come to losing one of his men.

The going was easier now and, though still heading uphill, the Americans were able to keep up with the German squad. Kirby spoke at last. "How far you think we're going, Sarge?"

"Doesn't matter." Saunders added under his breath, "Keep your eyes open."

Kirby gave a short laugh. Sarge never gave up. Hadn't they been through enough already? How could they ever hope to make a break for it, especially with Littlejohn wounded and the German rifles leveled right at them?

A sudden high-pitched whistle cut through the air, followed by a blast of dirt, metal, and dirt. The three Germans in front of them were blown off of their feet, parts of them, their helmets, their weapons hurled through the air. Kirby, Saunders, and Littlejohn fell to the ground, covering their heads from the flying debris. Men screamed and dived for cover as there was another, louder explosion a few yards to the right. In the midst of the confusion, Kirby grabbed the nervous teenager's rifle, shot him and the soldier beside him without a moment's hesitation.

Saunders quickly set the bike upright and turned it around as Kirby helped

Littlejohn back on the seat.

"Hang on, Littlejohn!" Saunders yelled. They gave Littlejohn a tremendous push down the hill and dove for cover as another explosion showered clods of dirt and shrapnel upon them. Saunders reached for a discarded Mauser, then pulling Kirby with him, rolled to the side of the road and down the embankment. They collapsed next to each other, gasping for breath. The soldiers cowered in the ditch, grasping their weapons, as the barrage gradually faded into the distance. After a few more moments, Saunders crawled to the top of the ditch looking for signs of life. The German squad lay strewn over the pavement, a shroud of black, acrid-smelling smoke hanging over all.

Saunders turned back to Kirby. "You okay?"

The private swallowed hard and nodded. "Just nicked." They were both cut and bleeding from small shards of shrapnel, with their uniforms torn and covered with dirt.

Painfully, they climbed up the embankment and started to follow the road downhill, expecting to find Littlejohn lying in a ditch along the side, but he was nowhere in sight.

"Where the heck did he go? He wouldn't have gone way off into a field, you think?" Kirby scratched his head, looking up and down the pavement.

Saunders shook his head in wonder. "We'll just keep following the road back to our lines. He's gotta be up ahead. Check the other side. I'll search over here. Just keep close to cover."

It was beginning to get dark now, with a damp chill settling down, and they continued to comb through the bushes and shrubs. Still no Littlejohn.



The sound of approaching vehicles sent the men diving behind a nearby thicket. In the waning light, they could make out an American convoy slowly making its way up the road, soldiers walking single file on either side of it. Kirby punched his sergeant lightly on the arm.

"Okay, easy now," the noncom uttered as he dropped the German Mauser, stood slowly, arms above his head, and moved into the open. Kirby followed his lead.

"We're Americans!" Saunders shouted. "King company, second platoon. Sergeant Saunders and Private Kirby."

The convoy came to a halt. For one sick second, ten rifles trained upon them, but the tension was quickly replaced by whoops and shouts of recognition.

"Sarge! Hey, Kirby!" Cajé swung his rifle on his shoulder and approached with the others. "Where've you been...?"

Saunders waved off the questions. "Littlejohn? Did you see Littlejohn?"

"Craziest thing I ever seen!" piped up a soldier beside Cajé. "About a quarter mile back, we're going along, when this giant comes coasting right at us on this rickety bike, his legs sticking straight out. At first we figure it's gotta be some crazy villager..."

Cajé laughed, adding, "It was Littlejohn!"

Relief spread across the sergeant's face as the men convulsed in laughter.

"Where is he?"

"Doc's got him in the back, a couple of trucks to the rear." Cajé smiled. "C'mon, he's looking for you, too."

They followed the wiry Cajun to the rear of the convoy and stopped in the back of a battered personnel carrier.

"*Voilà*." Cajé presented the occupants with a slight bow. Littlejohn lay on a stretcher, his bandaged leg propped up on some extra blankets. Doc sat next to him.

"Hey!" exclaimed Doc, who started to rise. Littlejohn raised himself up on his elbows as Saunders and Kirby hopped in the back.

"Hiya, Sarge."

The sergeant smiled down at him. "Hey, you made it."

"We all made it." A moment of silence passed. Then he added quietly, "Thanks, Sarge."

Kirby cleared his throat. "Yeah, uh, Sarge...."

Saunders cut him off, rubbing the back of his neck and shifting uneasily. "Yeah, well, I gotta go. Hanley will be looking for me...." Bowing his head, he turned to leave.

"Sarge?"

He looked back up at Littlejohn, who was grinning at him.

"Thanks for the bike ride."

end