

THE TUNNEL

By: Miss Maquis



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When he opened his eyes, the first thing he should have seen was light. Instead, darkness surrounded him, wrapping him in a tightening cocoon. His stomach felt dislocated while his head pounded. Trapped in a long, murky tunnel, he struggled toward the promising light of consciousness. Then a pinpoint of brightness appeared at the edge of his darkened vision.

The spot of light grew larger, and the enclosing walls of the tunnel started to fade away. At first he was glad for the light, but soon it grew brighter and it hurt his eyes. Having been so eager to be free of the tunnel earlier, he wished the shadow would come back as he tried to avert his gaze from the brightness. Moving his head slightly caused more light to explode across his line of vision and waves of pain to flow from head to toe, leaving him gasping for relief. If his head detached itself and rolled onto the ground, he wouldn't have been surprised. Deciding to wait until the world slowed down and the lights grew dimmer, he ceased his movement.

Soon, things began to gain their crazed sense of normality. Crisp, clear sunshine streamed through the trees oblivious to his aching eyes and head. Blinking blurry eyes to focus them, he saw he was lying upon tramped grass in between groves of trees. Slowly his senses returned to service; sight, smell, sound, and touch. But something was wrong; there was a dreaded, familiar hush in the air that wasn't penetrated by the smallest bird or cricket. The smell of death and rifle smoke was heavy. Fear touched his heart.



Uncontrolled and unstoppable, images and memories flew through his head. Gunshots, men screaming, shouts of command, earth shaking explosions, men falling. A voice he knew as his own shouted in his memory, "Pull back! Pull back!" He had turned his head to shout to another, a sergeant. But the sergeant had fallen down. He had run toward the downed sergeant, but the world suddenly went dark.

The sergeant. Turning his head and ignoring the pain, the soldier looked for his fallen comrade. He didn't have to search far; ten feet away another man was lying face down. Clawing at the dirt, the man pulled himself toward the collapsed soldier, straining every muscle to reach him. When the enormous journey was completed, the man grabbed the other's shoulder and pulled him over.

Staring into the face, the man tried to remember the name. The dirty blond hair, the blue eyes, he should know them, but he couldn't place the man's face. Suddenly he realized that the man he was staring at wasn't responding, wasn't moving and wasn't breathing. His dirt stained fingers searched for a pulse, but he could not find one. The blue eyes of the sergeant's face were looking at nothing; he was dead.

Slowly, the man closed the sightless eyes. He had needed this soldier to be alive, to tell the man what had happened and who he was. Without the sergeant, he was trapped again, and his memory was locked away without a single hopeful ray of light.

The dog tags. Look at the dog tags, thought. Pulling the tags out from under the dead sergeant's shirt, the man tried to read them. However, he couldn't focus on the

small metal pieces; his vision was still blurred. Without thinking, he snapped off one of the sergeant's tags and placed it in a pocket. Something ran across his mind—it could barely be called a thought—but it left him with a name. Saunders. He was almost certain that the dead sergeant was called Saunders. If only his head would stop aching, he would be able to think.

Carefully raising a hand to the back of his head, he tried to assess the damage. A knot larger than his fist was forming, along with a concussion, no doubt. How it had happened, he had no idea. He knew he was lucky to be alive.

His thoughts drifted randomly from one trail to another, but always back to the most bothersome question. Who was he? Was he a sergeant like the dead man? Absently, he fingered his shoulder, searching for the three strips that would be sewn to his sleeve. When his fingers brushed over plain material, his brow furrowed. A private, perhaps? His fingers explored higher, feeling something on his collar. Tracing the pattern, he recognized the size and shape of two bars. A lieutenant; he must be a lieutenant. But Lieutenant whom?

Once again, the same thought reoccurred. *Dog tags. Look at your dog tags.* Digging under his shirt, he pulled up the chain on which his two dog tags were attached. Unable to focus on the tags, he pulled the chain off his neck and held out metal strips. Nevertheless, his eyes refused to cooperate. They could not focus enough to read the tiny print no matter how far or close the tag was. Then he heard something that caused the tags to slip from his hand and clatter to the earth unnoticed.

Heart pounding, every inch of his body screamed to run and hide, yet he stood still. There, the sound came again. It was a cry for help. The pitiful voice sounded for a third time before the lieutenant's tight muscles released him. Lurching forward, the man stumbled over the carnage of the skirmish, desperately trying to reach the voice's source before it was silenced.

An unrecognizable croak rose from his throat. "Where are you?"

The voice answered him, and then the lieutenant saw its owner. Not far from a shell crater, a soldier was lying flat on his back. His face was covered in blood from cuts on his forehead. Dirt and debris that had rained down during the attack blanketed the man from head to toe. Even though scarcely recognizable, the lieutenant could tell that the private was young.

"Medic?" the man asked in a pitiable, fearful tone. "Please help me. I can't see!"

The lieutenant knelt down beside the wounded man, unsure of what he should do. "I'm not a medic. I'm a lieutenant." He added a whispered afterthought, "I think."

"You think?" the private had heard the whisper.

"Yes, I've lost my memory; I'm not sure who I am."

"Please sir, help me!" The private's hands groped forward, hands stretching in pain. "Please sir, I can't see," he repeated.

One of the private's hands hit against the lieutenant's sleeve, and he grabbed hold of it. Reaching for the private's hand with his other arm, the lieutenant held the clenched fist. "I'll do what I can."

"Thank you, sir," the private released his grip.

The quiet confidence that the blind private displayed in him gave the lieutenant the will and meaning to carry on. He might not know who he was, but he felt certain he hadn't earned his rank sitting behind a desk all day long. With that note of unspoken encouragement, the lieutenant went into action.

Kneeling next to the private, the lieutenant took in quick stock of what he had that could be of use. Attached to his web belt was a canteen, within which water sloshed. Releasing it from its holder, the lieutenant unscrewed the cap and placed it in the private's hand.

"Here, drink some water," he said, guiding the private's hand. The private drank greedily until the lieutenant pulled it away. "I'll need some to clean your head wound," he explained.

The lieutenant's gear belt also revealed a first aid kit complete with a couple bandages and sulfa powder. After cleaning away the blood and dirt, the lieutenant patched the private up. Mostly the wounds consisted of shallow scratches, but the worst was a large gash running close to the private's right eye with a bruise rapidly forming under it.

"There, that will do for now," the lieutenant broke the silence. All through his rather clumsy procedure, the private hadn't uttered a word of protest. A sudden thought flitted across the lieutenant's mind, "*I wish Doc was here; he'd do a better job.*" Just as quickly as the thought had occurred, the memory attached to it disappeared.

"Sir, is everything all right?" The private sounded concerned, he had heard the lieutenant give a sharp gasp.

"Just thought I remembered something," the lieutenant answered slowly. Try as he might, he could not force the memory back. The tunnel he was lost in grew closer, and the glimmer he had seen for an instant faded.

Perhaps it was best to let the memories come without compelling them. Meanwhile, it was time to start moving. Taking a quick survey of the skirmish field, the lieutenant saw that he and the private were the only soldiers left alive.

"Private, what's your name?" the lieutenant asked as he rose to his feet.

"Drake, sir. My first name is Samuel."

"All right Drake, do you think you can stand? We need to get out of here before the Germans move in. From the looks of things, they should be here soon."

"It didn't go well for us sir?" the sightless private questioned.

"Apparently not," the lieutenant replied, while scanning the battlefield.

"I think I can stand, sir." Drake said.

"Wait just a moment," the lieutenant stopped the private. "I'm going to look for a weapon, you stay here."

Leaving Drake, the lieutenant quickly searched the battlefield. He found two serviceable M1 rifles close by, so he took them from their lifeless owners and turned back. He decided against picking up a helmet, though he felt incomplete without one. With his head continuing to ache, he knew the helmet would be more of a hindrance than a help. Returning to Drake, he handed the blind private a rifle and then helped him to his feet.

The sightless world Drake was in spun round him, and he again clutched the lieutenant's arms until he was steady. Then Drake loosened his hold.

"Put your arm over my shoulder," the lieutenant instructed. "Let's go."

Carefully making their way around the craters and dead bodies, the lieutenant briefly thought about the pathetic picture the two made, a blind private clutching a rifle and being guided by a similarly armed, stumbling lieutenant. If any unfortunate German came across them, the enemy would die of laughter.

The lieutenant chose his heading based on the way the bodies of the fallen soldiers lay. While either way chosen was a gamble, the lieutenant lead the way back through the largest concentration of fallen Americans.

The progress they made was slow. Even with the lieutenant's support, Drake tripped often. The lieutenant's headache throbbed with each step, and sweat poured from both men. Unsure of how much time had passed since they had started; the lieutenant decided it was time for a rest. He eased Drake down against a tree trunk, and then sank to the ground himself.

In between gasping for breath, the two took small sips of the tepid water that was

left in the canteen. After a few moments had gone by, the lieutenant asked, "Are you doing all right?"

"I'm okay." Drake replied. "I still can't see, but everything isn't as dark as it used to be. It's more like dark gray instead of pitch black."

"That's good."

"Yes." The private paused, as if embarrassed by his next question, but he was still concerned enough to voice, "How about you, sir? Has your memory returned?"

The lieutenant didn't give an answer immediately, and then he replied in a tired and slightly frustrated tone, "No, nothing yet. I just had those two faint recollections, but they're gone now."

"I guess you can't force it," Drake offered awkwardly.

"No, I suppose not." The lieutenant added an afterthought that was tinged with hope, "What is the name of the lieutenant of your company?"

"His name is Lieutenant Buddy. I'm from Love Company, third squad. But I've only been with them for about two weeks. I don't know any of the other lieutenants' names," Drake answered apologetically. He might be blind; nevertheless his few encounters with Lieutenant Buddy made him sure that this lieutenant was not from Love Company.

Try as he may, the lieutenant could not trick his mind into remembering. Even the name Private Drake supplied did nothing to suppress the darkness and give a hope of light.

The lieutenant clenched his fists in frustration, but then slowly accepted the shadows of the tunnel. Maybe the light would come, and maybe not, but instinct told him that he must now focus on keeping Drake and himself alive.

Pulling his rifle up, he inspected the weapon and found that it was empty. Searching his pockets and belt, the lieutenant found that he had a couple magazines full of .308 bullets that would fit a carbine. However, the Garand rifles he and Drake were carrying could only be loaded with 30.06 cartridges.

After checking Drake's rifle and finding it was fully loaded, the lieutenant asked if the private had any extra ammunition. Fortunately, Drake had three clips for the M1 in his pocket. Loading his rifle with one of the clips and keeping another, the lieutenant gave Drake the other rifle and the last clip.

Drake accepted the rifle, but his countenance was unsure. "Sir, what am I going to do with this? I can't see anything; what if I need to use the rifle? You should at least take the extra ammo."

"No, you keep them. I can't handle both rifles and help you."

"But sir," Drake protested again, only to be stopped by the lieutenant.

"You said that your vision is starting to lighten, right?"

"Yes, it's more gray than black. But I..."

"Then there's a good chance that your blindness is only temporary. And I'm willing to bet that you'll get your sight back. If you do, then you'll have no problem handling the rifle. Until then, even if a situation demands both of us use the rifles, you can at least help by laying cover fire. Now, until you can see again, carry the rifle."

"Yes sir," Drake cradled the rifle in his arms, holding it with a sure, steady grip that spoke of familiarity. The lieutenant's confidence was contagious, but there still was the slightest nagging doubt in the back of his mind. "Where to now, sir?"

The lieutenant rose to his feet. "We'll keep going the way we were heading." Helping Drake up again, the two supported each other as they resumed their journey

They hadn't gone far before all the confidence and optimism spoken of earlier was needed to serve the pair. Shots suddenly split the air all around the two. Dropping to the ground, the lieutenant pulled Drake down underneath him, trying to shield the blind private. Gingerly lifting his head, the lieutenant looked for the source of the incoming fire and saw the muzzle flashes slightly ahead. He also spotted a group of medium-sized boulders and brush that would serve as protective cover.

Crouching back down as another volley whistled past them, the lieutenant shouted instructions into Drake's ear. "There's some cover over to our left. Start crawling, I'll be right beside you." The lieutenant didn't pause to see if Drake acknowledged the order, he simply slapped the boy's shoulder and hollered, "Go!"

Heart pounding and nearly frozen with fear, Drake had barely registered the lieutenant's words. The slap to his shoulder caused him to jump forward. With the lieutenant right besides him pushing him on, Drake started to crawl. Sweat poured from both men, as they moved forward fueled by heart-pounding adrenaline. Now that they had started, there was no turning back.

Wiggling ahead as quickly as possible, their objective was reached after an eternity of seconds had passed. Drake stopped moving when he felt the tangle of rock and brush against his finger tips. Reaching forward, he touched the small barrier, as if reassuring himself that some sort of protection was there. The lieutenant noticed Drake's movement, and he quickly detailed their surroundings.

"We're behind the last standing segment of an old stone wall. There are two gaps in the stones; one to your left and one to your right that can be used to fire from. The Germans are almost directly in front of us; there are three or four of them. With you laying down cover, there's a chance I can out flank them and get us out of this mess."

Drake spoke for the first time since the Germans had discovered them. His voice, shaken with worry, matched the trembling in his hands. "Sir, I can't do this! I'm no help to you."

The silence that followed was only accented by the whine and snap of the Germans' bullets as they bounced off the old, crumbling stones.

"You're right," the lieutenant snapped back. "You are no help to me. So stay here and hide behind the rocks because you can't see. You're scared? Well so am I! But you can't keep hiding just because you're afraid of what's around the corner." He chambered a round in the M1. "I'm going around to the right to try to out flank them before they pin us down any further. I thought I had a man with me, but I was wrong." Without any further words, the lieutenant crawled over the still form of the private.

Drake didn't move, but lay there with his head hanging down to the ground. His hold on the rifle was so tight that the wood bit deep into his hands, but he didn't feel the pain. Instead, he replayed the lieutenant's last words over and over in his mind.

He had seen action almost as soon as he had joined his squad. But nothing he had experienced could compare with the blind helplessness he felt. It was one thing to walk down a road being supported by a man who could see. The game was totally different when he was alone and told to fight against an enemy who knew where he was hiding.

After a long minute of deliberation, Drake knew if he stayed here he would never forgive himself. His life might be over in a few minutes, and he'd have nothing to show for it. The lieutenant was out trying to find a way around the Germans; he was hiding. Drawing a deep breath, Drake knew what he had to do. He might be blind, but he couldn't hide beneath the excuse of the shadows any more.

Reaching to the left, and then to the right, the private located the gaps in the stones that the lieutenant had mentioned. He could hear the Mausers as they continued firing on and around his position. Raising the rifle to the right hole, he cycled the bolt,

rested his cheek against the warm wood, and gently fingered for the trigger. The fear that had frozen and confined him slipped away, and the dark path he had traveled dissolved.

"Lieutenant, I can see." the blind man whispered. He pulled the trigger.

After leaving Drake, the lieutenant slipped through the underbrush as noiselessly as possible. He was still furious from Drake's cowardice, along with being frustrated over his own inability to move Drake out of the trap of fear. Shaking his head, he tried his best to put the matter on the back of his mind. The task ahead needed his undivided attention, especially if he couldn't rely on Drake for cover. One small slip on his part and both their lives would be forfeit.

Risking a quick look, the lieutenant saw the four Germans that had pinned them down. He decided against opening fire from his position, as he had insignificant cover and the angle was bad. After scanning the terrain in front of him, the lieutenant decided to aim for two massive trees that were growing close together. There he would be a bit above the Germans, have a good firing range, and be slightly protected.

He glanced back at the old stone wall where Drake was out of sight. A twinge of worry ran through him, which he endeavored to push aside. *Concentrate on your job*, he told himself, *Drake must choose his own way*. Just as the lieutenant started to move on, he heard the crack of an M1 behind him. An unnoticed smile briefly touched his face; Drake had found the right path.

The sudden return of American lead kept the Germans' attention occupied. While Drake couldn't see his targets, his random shots kept the enemy guessing. Continuing to push forward, the lieutenant quickly reached his objective. Just as he reached the protecting trees, the lieutenant heard a change in the Germans' firing pattern.

Leaning out slightly, the lieutenant saw the cause of the variance. There were only three Germans firing at Drake; the fourth was nowhere to be seen. Knowing that the missing German was on his way to out flank the blind private, the lieutenant tensed when Drake suddenly stopped firing. A heart-stopping instant later, the M1 sang to life again; Drake must have reloaded.

Still behind the protection of the trees, the lieutenant stood and sighted in on a German. He needed to quickly take care of these three before he could do anything about the fourth. Just prior to squeezing the trigger, the world suddenly cart-wheeled into a dissonance of noise and movement.

As the lieutenant fell to the ground, the M1 preceding him, he was vaguely aware that the three Germans in front of him were dead; there was a rapid volley of gunshots to his far left; and he heard Drake cry out in pain. There was nothing he could do.

Flat on his back and staring up at the blue sky, the colors of the landscape started to fade away. The bleak tunnel was catching up with him again, pulling him back into its smothering confines. He tried to fight against the onslaught of darkness, but he was powerless against such a great foe. As the last wall closed around him another gunshot rang out, but it went unnoticed.

Slowly, the blackness began to ease into gray once more. The light started to break around him, pushing unconsciousness back to its shadowy land of birth. However, a large part of light was being blocked by something that was bending over

him. Trying to clear his eyes, the lieutenant attempted to identify the friend or foe.

Anxious blue eyes stared down at him. As the lieutenant looked back, more of the man's features began to clear. The soldier bending over him was no more than a boy, and a very worried and frightened one at that. While the lieutenant was adjusting to the sight, he realized the private was saying something.

"Sir, I am so sorry! I saw you stand up just as I threw the grenade!"

The words tumbled from his mouth as he glanced over his superior looking for wounds. The worried look stayed in his eyes as he silently pleaded for the lieutenant to say something.

"Who are you?" the lieutenant mumbled through dry lips.

The private threw a worried look to another person who was kneeling at the lieutenant's other side. "I'm Billy Nelson, sir. Please, are you hurt?"

Changing his gaze, the lieutenant caught the features of the second man next to him. Different blue eyes under blond hair intently looked back at him. The well worn, tan jacket the man wore had sergeant stripes on its sleeves. His tense body posture and piercing eyes divulged the fact that the man was as worried and concerned as the private.

"Saunders... you're not dead!" The awestruck whisper grated from the lieutenant's throat.

Sergeant Saunders exhaled the breath he had been holding and then gave a grin at the lieutenant's words. "No," he replied, visibly relaxing. "I'm not. Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so."

"Just lie still," Saunders soothed. "Billy, go get Doc."

Billy hurriedly rose to carry out the order, and Saunders turned back to the lieutenant. The lieutenant didn't even notice the private's exit, he was trying to figure out what had happened, yet his mind was still moving slowly.

While he recognized Saunders, there were still large pieces of his memory missing in the darkness. The private named Nelson had mentioned something about a grenade, yes, that would account for the blast that had caused the dread tunnel to come back. Stretching his weary mind, the lieutenant attempted to remember what had happened before that. Gradually, the events that had preceded the grenade blast filtered back to him, the Germans, Drake firing, and the two trees.

What had happened to Drake? The thought made the lieutenant start forward, trying to pull himself into a sitting position. Saunders didn't have to push hard to get him to lie back on the ground, the lieutenant's rushing headache made rising impossible. Weakly, he tried to communicate what was wrong.

"Drake," he gasped, pointing towards the old wall, "Drake needs help."

"Doc's with him," Saunders assured him.

"Doc...." The lieutenant immediately placed who the sergeant was talking about. The tunnel was collapsing, but not fast enough. He turned his attention back to Saunders, who was speaking again.

"Doc will be here in a minute. Lieutenant, we had to leave you behind when we pulled back. We were coming back for you when we heard the Krauts open fire. We saw the private behind the wall across from the Germans' position, so I told Billy to throw



the grenade. I had no idea you were anywhere near the Germans until I saw you move behind the trees. It's my fault you were hurt, not Nelson's. I should have looked harder."

"It's all right, Saunders. I was knocked out just as we were pulling back from the earlier skirmish. When I came to, only Drake and I were alive, and we both were hurt. We helped each other back until we ran across this patrol of Germans. I think...." He suddenly stopped, his eyes wide with anticipation.

"Sir?" Saunders questioned, his concern rising.

"I think... I am Lieutenant Gil Hanley."

"Of course you are, sir." Sarge assured him. "Did you lose some of your memory?"

"Yes, all of it. But it's coming to me now." Hanley looked back at Saunders. His voice was confident. The tunnel's walls had finally been broken, and the daylight was streaming in.

"And you thought I was dead?"

The memory of the dead sergeant replayed itself. Moving his hand to his jacket pocket, Hanley felt deep within and pulled out the dog tag. He handed it to Saunders, who read it.

"It's Sergeant Carson's. He did look like me."

"He led second squad," Hanley stated. "I connected his face with your name."



The lieutenant was still speaking when a medic rushed over and knelt down by his side. His practiced eye and hand quickly assessed that there were no wounds sustained from the grenade blast.

"How is Drake?" Hanley questioned Doc.

"He's fine. He caught a bullet along his arm, but he'll be okay. I'm worried about his eye sight, though."

Hanley again stirred, trying to rise. "We need to get him to the hospital."

Doc interrupted him, "Lieutenant, you just lie easy. Don't get excited. You've been knocked hard on the head, though I don't think it was from grenade. I'm sure you'll be fine, but don't move suddenly. Kirby and Nelson are rigging two stretchers, and then we'll get you both to the hospital."

"Help me over to Drake," the lieutenant stubbornly requested.

Just at that moment, Nelson brought the stretcher he had completed. Together, Doc and Saunders eased Hanley onto the stretcher and then gently carried him to the stone wall and placed him next to Drake.

The blind private now had fresh bandages on his head wounds, another over his eyes, and one large one around his left shoulder. Though exhausted, he was leaning against the crumbling wall still holding his rifle. Around him stood the other members of Saunders' squad, Caje, Littlejohn, and Kirby.

"I checked on the Germans, Sarge; they're all dead." Caje informed him. "I caught the fourth one who was moving after Nelson threw the grenade."

"Good. Help Doc get Drake on the other stretcher." Saunders motioned to the wounded private. "You ready to move out, Lieutenant?"

"In a moment. How are you doing, Drake?" The blind private had Hanley's full attention.

"I'm fine, sir. My eyes are pretty much the same, but maybe the doctors can help." He paused as he was carefully placed onto his stretcher and then added, "And

you, sir?"

"My memory has come back; I'm Lieutenant Hanley from Company K. Sergeant Saunders and his squad from my platoon found us, so we'll be at a hospital soon," Hanley assured him. "You did well, Drake."

"Thank you for getting me out, sir," Drake quietly said.

"No, you got yourself out," Hanley replied.

"Yes sir. But what you said helped pull me through."

"I only lit the lamp; you found the tunnel's exit." Relaxing back on the stretcher, Hanley looked up at the watching sergeant. "Let's go home, Saunders."

end

