

# Trusted Bond

by Lab Squad Leader (Dede)



All references to Saunders' military history (until he joins the 361<sup>st</sup>) are based on historically accurate facts of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division / 60<sup>th</sup> Regimental Infantry Combat Team / 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion.

Distinguished Unit Citation became the Presidential Unit Citation in 1966.

4<sup>th</sup> Medical Battalion is an actual unit that came over on D-Day at Utah Beach.

SS Interrogation Methods used are actual methods used by the SS and are based on accounts by actual victims documented in manuscripts from the Nuremburg Trial. However, these methods were not typically used against American GIs.

*Thanks to DII for giving me the confidence to tackle this story and encouraging me through the process*

Saunders continued to fire into the darkness providing cover for the rest of the squad as they withdrew. Since his fire had not been returned for the last several minutes, he was reasonably sure his last grenade took care of the Krauts. Nevertheless he was not taking any chances as the remaining members of First Squad hobbled and dragged each other to safety. Saunders didn't believe any of them were critically wounded but he wouldn't know for sure until he pulled back as well. They would all retreat to where Doc waited with an injured Lieutenant Hanley.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

The Germans began shelling earlier in the day and the Americans had been trying to hold off the assault since late afternoon. First Squad covered the left flank in case the main attack came along the river. All day several German patrols kept them plenty busy but the big push did not come from the river.

Hanley was wounded just before sunset. Only grazed, he refused to go back to the Aid Station. Doc was not happy with his decision so a compromise between Hanley and the medic was reached. The lieutenant pulled back from the front line but remained close enough to remain in command. Saunders was, in fact, glad Hanley stayed, otherwise the NCO probably would have been ordered to take command of the platoon. Saunders hated being put in charge for the sheer reason it took him away from his squad and the fighting.

It was well past sunset as the Germans continued to mount their assault and the Americans were losing ground. The last skirmish First Squad had with another Kraut patrol took a final toll on the men. A grenade explosion caused Billy and Kirby to get hit with shrapnel or debris, Saunders couldn't be sure which. While both seemed to be somewhat debilitated they were still conscious and firing. Littlejohn took a tumble trying to scramble away from the explosion and now limped severely. Saunders and Cage circled around the Germans and Saunders threw a grenade but not before Cage was hit in the leg. After that Saunders sent them all back to find Doc, while he remained to provide cover fire.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Saunders sat perfectly still in the darkness as he tried to slow his breath and calm his nerves. He listened for any indication there were Krauts waiting to follow. Initially, all he could hear was the sound of his own heart racing and the gun fire from the fighting all around him. The rest of Second Platoon was on his right, and Third Platoon was off somewhere on the far left.

Once he was finally able to focus, Saunders could practically feel each sound rather than hear them. Confident there was no immediate threat he began to pull back. Just to be safe the sergeant chose to zigzag his way back rather than taking the more direct route.

When Saunders finally made it back to Doc and the others, he circled around them, as he gave one more look for any Krauts. His security check completed, he approached as Doc was busy working on Cage's leg. Saunders leaned over the medic's shoulder to have a look. "How bad is it, Doc?"

A startled Cage immediately grabbed for his M-1 before seeing it was Saunders.

"Sarge, where the hell did you come from? Ya like to give me a heart attack."

"You and me both," the medic added as he finished with the bandage. With a slight grin, Doc continued. "Answer to your first question, not too bad, just a deep flesh wound. He'll need to stay off it for a couple of days."

Saunders looked around at the rest of the men and barked, "You're lucky I wasn't a Kraut. The way you let me walk right in here!" Saunders looked over at Lieutenant Hanley, who had been obviously asleep until the commotion associated with Saunders' unexpected

arrival.

Kirby waved off Saunders and wisecracked. "We were expecting you, Sarge. Knew it was you all the time." He received a glaring look from the NCO and quickly shut up.

Saunders surveyed the rest of the squad. "What about the rest of them?" He questioned the medic as he gestured to the other members of First Squad.

Doc stood up and pointed out their various injuries. "Kirby's got a good piece of shrapnel in his hand. It needs to be cleaned out and he'll have trouble handling the BAR for a couple of days. Billy got hit the head by something and likely has a slight concussion. Littlejohn has a pretty badly sprained ankle."

The medic moved in closer to Saunders and softly continued. "The lieutenant has started bleeding again and is running a fever. We really need get him to an Aid Station as soon as possible."

Saunders nodded. "So how long is everyone going to be out of action?" The sergeant slowly started to walk over towards Hanley.

"I'd say just a couple of days for the most part." Doc watched Saunders saunter over to the lieutenant. The medic studied the interaction between the lieutenant and his NCO. Saunders rarely overstepped his place in the chain of command but Doc observed it was not always clear who was actually giving the orders when the two of them spoke.

Saunders lit a cigarette and handed it to Hanley. "Lieutenant, don't you think you, Doc, and the rest of the wounded should be getting out of here?"

Hanley glanced up and took the Lucky from Saunders. "We're all getting out of here, Sergeant. Pulling back to Phase Line Red." Hanley stood up gingerly, as he grabbed at his side. "The Germans have broken through all along the lines."

"I guess they didn't bother sneaking round by the river." Saunders stated frankly. "Just plowed right through the middle." He added with an unmistakable tone of *I told you so*.

Hanley ignored the implications of Saunders' tone and continued. "First Platoon is swinging in to cover the retreat. But I need you to make sure O'Neill and Johnson get the word we're pulling back."

"Right, Lieutenant." Saunders pointed around at the wounded. "Are all of you going to be okay to make it back on your own?"

Hanley arched his eyebrow. "I think we'll be able to manage without your help." He gave Saunders a look of concern. "You just take care of yourself."

Saunders looked over at Doc, who nodded. "Always do, Lieutenant." With that, Saunders smiled and headed off to find the rest of Second Platoon.



\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Saunders reached Third Squad and announced his presence. He knew whoever was on security was likely to be edgy, and he didn't intend to expose himself to any itchy fingered GI. Sergeant O'Neill chuckled at Saunders' caution. "Getting skittish there in your old age, Saunders?"

Saunders gave a half-smile. "Just smart and staying alive. Figured one of those scared kids of yours would be out here on security." He strolled in from the brush to O'Neill.

Following their brief moment of levity, Sergeant O'Neill stood up to meet Saunders. "I

assume you didn't come all the way over here for a good laugh."

Saunders shifted the Thompson on his shoulder and grimly replied. "The Krauts have busted through all up and down our lines."

"Tell me something I don't know." O'Neill continued to stare out into the darkness as he and Saunders spoke.

"We're pulling back to Phase Line Red. First Platoon is covering the retreat. You need to get your squad out of here now. While you still have a chance." Saunders was already turning to leave.

"What about you?"

"I gotta go tell Johnson." Saunders shrugged as he gave a quick look back and headed into the darkness.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

It was not difficult for Saunders to find the exact location of Second Squad; he just followed the sound of gun fire. Saunders sensed Sergeant Johnson's squad was in trouble and hurried his pace. When he arrived upon Second Squad, Saunders found them boxed in and outnumbered. The Germans didn't hear him and he was able to easily get behind them undetected. Saunders threw his last grenade, taking out half the Germans. Without difficulty, Second Squad and Saunders were then able to finish off the remaining Krauts.

Saunders joined the squad and was greeted by a ragged, blood-spattered private. "I don't know where you came from. But boy am I glad to see you, Sarge."

"Where's Sergeant Johnson?" Saunders asked, not readily seeing their squad leader.

"Saunders, that you?" came a hoarse whisper from a soldier lying on the ground.

Saunders quickly rushed over to find the sergeant lying with two additional wounded soldiers. "Yeah, Johnson. It's me." Saunders kneeled next to the other NCO.

"They pinned us in about 30 minutes ago. I got hit in the chest, Davis in the neck, and Thomas in the side. I figured we were all goners until you showed up."

"We need to get you out of here." Saunders looked over the three wounded soldiers. "Davis, can you walk?"

"You bet," responded the private as he staggered to his feet.

Saunders pointed to the other four members of Second Squad who looked to be relatively uninjured. "Okay, we need to rig two litters." It took only a few minutes for the litters to be rigged and Sergeant Johnson and Thomas placed on them. "The whole platoon is pulling back to Phase Line Red." Not knowing how long Sergeant Johnson would remain conscious, Saunders pointed out where they were headed on the map to the others. "Okay, you head out."

"Saunders, what are you going to do?" Johnson inquired.

"I'm gonna buy you some time." Saunders knew with the wounded, Second Squad would not be able to outrun any Germans. So he decided to stay back and cover their retreat.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Saunders heard the German patrol shortly after Second Squad started out. In order to draw the Krauts away from the squad, he ran in the opposite direction firing randomly into the darkness. It wasn't long before his shots were answered. Saunders used the darkness to his advantage and kept on the move.

He hoped the Krauts were successfully diverted away from Second Squad and now focused on saving himself. Saunders gambled a lone soldier, in the dark, and on the move, would be more difficult to locate. His gamble paid off until he tripped a flare while running. As it went off Saunders immediately dove blindly for whatever cover he could find. At the same

instance he lunged for cover, a grenade landed near him. The grenade exploded and Saunders was thrown down an embankment, landing unconscious in the thick brush at the bottom of a small ravine.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Second Squad arrived at Phase Line Red just before day break. They staggered into the temporary Aid Station and were met by Doc and Sergeant O'Neill. Doc began to take a look at Davis' neck as an unconscious Sergeant Johnson and Thomas were taken immediately inside.

Sergeant O'Neill held out a pack of cigarettes for the other members of Second Squad. "We were beginning to think you guys weren't gonna make it."

"We wouldn't have, it wasn't for Saunders. Man, he sure pulled our butts out of the fire!" exclaimed the same ragged, blood-spattered private who had first greeted Saunders.

Another of the exhausted squad members added. "Yeah, we sure owe him a cold glass of beer!"

"Where is he?"

Doc quickly shot a concerned look at O'Neill. "We thought he'd be with you."

Davis replied. "Last we saw him ..." dismally he finished as he realized the serious implications. "He was heading the Krauts off in the opposite direction."

"We just figured he circled back around and beat us here." The private followed up, not yet fully comprehending the gravity of the situation.

Doc headed instantly to inform the members of First Squad.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Kirby stood watching the first signs of daybreak out the window, smoking his fifth cigarette since Doc told First Squad about Saunders. "We need to go look for him. Ya know he'd be here by now if he weren't in trouble."

"We can't go out there all busted up." Cage winced as he tried desperately to walk on his wounded leg. "We won't be any good to the Sarge."

"Cage, you know the only ones who'll go lookin' for him are sittin' right here." Kirby flexed his hand to stretch the bandage on it.

"Maybe O'Neill can go." Billy tried to keep a positive tone in his voice as he felt the bump on his head. "He and Saunders are pretty close."

"Look, with Hanley out and Saunders missin' O'Neill's gonna be actin' Platoon Leader. So he CAN'T go," a frustrated Kirby pointed out as he tried to grip a bottle with his wounded hand.

Littlejohn was sitting on a cot rotating his sprained ankle. "You know if it was one of us. Sarge would find a way to look for us."

Billy looked at Cage. "You and Littlejohn can't even walk. So Kirby and I should go."

Doc quietly listened to the conversation while watching each of the squad members try to force their injuries away. He cleared his throat and spoke with his usual calm voice of reason. "Billy you have a concussion and aren't going anywhere. Kirby you can't even handle a gun with that hand."

"BUT we can't leave the Sarge out there. In German territory. Not AGAIN." Billy exclaimed.

There it was, finally spoken out loud. The nightmare they all shared. The fear of leaving Saunders for dead, when he wasn't dead and desperately needed their help. They had done that to their sergeant once before and had vowed they would never let him down again.

None of the men spoke but looked silently at each other. Doc saw the dismay in their eyes. "I'll go."

"Doc, you can't go." Cage protested.

Littlejohn concurred. "Doc, going out there would be way too dangerous."

"But not too dangerous for you guys to go look for him? All busted up." Doc's voice was edgy. "Just because I don't carry a gun doesn't mean I can't go look for him."

Kirby tried to smooth things over with the medic. "Doc, he didn't mean it like that. Just you'd likely run into Krauts out there."

A determined Doc continued. "The calls are still coming in to help get wounded. I'll go out with the ambulance." The medic was still trying to work out a plan in his own mind. "I'll try to search near Second Squad's last location." Doc could see he had them at least considering the idea. "If it looks too dangerous I won't go any further." He knew full well once he got out there nothing short of a bullet was going to stop him from looking for Saunders.

It was agreed Doc was Saunders' best and only chance. They would cover for the medic with Hanley as Doc went out to look for their missing sergeant.

"Doc, this has to be a first. Me coverin' for you." Kirby smirked.

Cage laughed. "Yeah, but at least Doc is doing something good, Kirby."

"That ain't gonna matter if Hanley finds out." Kirby surmised.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Doc rode in the front seat of the ambulance with the driver and was surprised when he abruptly pulled over. A puzzled Doc looked around and couldn't see any casualties.

The driver pointed out the windshield. "The river is west of where we are and Second Squad was just east of here."

Doc stammered a bit. "Whaddya talkin' about?"

"C'mon, Doc. We all know why you wanted to ride along with us." He reassured Doc as he patted him on the shoulder. "I'd recommend you start looking northeast of here."

"How do ya figure that?"

"Well, Second Squad would have headed this way and Saunders was trying to get the Krauts to go in the opposite direction. That would be northeast."

Doc took a deep breath. "Than I guess I'll start lookin' there."

Apologetically, the driver added. "This is as close as I can get you. We need to head off to First Platoon from here."

Doc nodded and stepped out of the ambulance. "Just 'preciate you gettin' me this far."

Doc shut the door, and the driver waved. "You keep your head down. You'll be headin' into Kraut territory."

Doc watched as the ambulance pulled off in a cloud of dust. For the first time since being in France, he felt truly alone. He suppressed his fears; there was no time for doubts now. Doc instead focused on Saunders as he headed northeast.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Saunders slowly opened his eyes and could see the first signs of daylight. When he started to sit up, his head began to swim, and instantly he was overcome by nausea. The sergeant's stomach lurched; he rolled over to heave, thankful there was nothing in it to empty. His breathing was heavy so he continued to lie quietly on his back. Saunders tried to calm the severe pounding in his head. With every heart beat his head felt as if there was a vice grip squeezing tighter and tighter.

Saunders put an arm over his eyes to block out the light and felt moisture. Looking at the back of his hand he could see it was blood. He gingerly felt around and found a three inch gash along his left temple. At least he now knew the source of his splitting headache.

As he very gradually sat up, a sharp pain shot through his left side. Saunders unzipped his jacket feeling the soreness along his ribs. He lifted up his shirts and saw a large bruise already forming along his ribcage. Tentatively, he felt his side checking for any broken bones.

Saunders heard a noise and grabbed for his Thompson. It was not within his immediate grasp or view and he froze. He turned quickly to look behind him, which caused an immense pain in his side.

Saunders grabbed his side and was relieved to also see the weapon lying a few feet behind him. Quietly he crawled to the Thompson and looked it over with a practiced eye, grateful the weapon was undamaged.

He listened for a potential threat and confident there was no immediate danger; Saunders finally got up. As he stood his left leg gave out. Saunders felt along the back of his left calf where there was a piece of metal sticking out through a tear in the pant leg. He grabbed the metal and removed the piece of shrapnel. Saunders pulled out a bandage, sprinkled the wound with sulfa and tightly wrapped his calf.

Saunders sat with his legs crossed and the Thompson lying in his lap. The camouflaged helmet was no where to be seen, but the Colt was still in the holster. He reflected on the previous night and how he ended up at the bottom of the ravine in the thick brush. Saunders vaguely remembered hearing German voices standing at the top of the rise, as they peered over. They were unable to see him and must have assumed he was dead. Saunders checked his watch and estimated he had been unconscious for roughly five hours.

Saunders turned his focus to the present and getting safely to the American lines. He again slowly rose to his feet, this time more steadily than the first. He looked up the embankment and determined it was too steep to scale back up where he rolled down. Saunders pulled out his map to orient himself and began to walk along the ravine, looking for a better place to climb back up.



\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Doc headed in a northeast direction for nearly two hours when he located the site Second Squad had been pinned down. He hoped there would be some sign as to where Saunders went once he left Second Squad, though he knew there wouldn't be. The medic fought back the urge to focus on the futility of his search. *This is even worse than lookin' for a needle in a haystack. At least the haystack won't shoot at ya!* He wrestled with his doubts and turned his focus instead to Saunders and remembering his first introduction to the gruff squad leader.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

*(Four Months Earlier)*

The jeep came to a screeching halt, practically dumping the medic sitting in the

passenger seat to the ground. "Thanks, Mac. Can't say I'll miss your driving," he added, with a grin, as he gathered himself.

"Anytime, Doc. Lieutenant Hanley is that tall fellow looking anxiously up the road." The driver yelled as he did a quick u-turn with the jeep. Doc was barely able to grab his gear as the jeep sped away.

Doc walked over to the lieutenant who continued to gaze out of town. "Lieutenant Hanley, I'm your new medic."

Hanley turned to face the medic but still kept his focus up the street. "Doc, we're glad to have you. We've been short on medics lately."

"Lieutenant, Sir. Is there somethin' you're lookin' for?"

The lieutenant gave a worried look to the medic. "I have a squad that is long overdue back from patrol."

Doc was not new to combat and knew exactly what that meant and what the lieutenant feared. Rather than asking a lot of questions, the medic just threw his gear to the side and quietly waited with the lieutenant.

It was not long before a ragged group of GIs came staggering around the corner. Doc noted the tension in the lieutenant's muscles immediately relaxed, and a smile came to his face as he saw the three-striped squad leader. Something told Doc that the relationship between this lieutenant and sergeant was far more than officer and NCO.

As the dirty and fatigued group of GIs approached, the sergeant instructed the other men and they headed off toward a burned out building. The NCO continued over to Lieutenant Hanley.

Doc noticed the soldier was covered in dirt, mud, sweat, and blood. He looked exhausted, and Doc wondered how the sergeant was still upright.

"Guess we're a bit late, huh?" The worn out soldier grinned at Lieutenant Hanley.

"Only by two days." Hanley smiled, handing him a lit Lucky.

The noncom laughed. "You weren't worried about us, were you, Lieutenant?"

"Me worry about you, Saunders? Never. I've just been waiting for the information you have."

Saunders reached inside his jacket, pulled out a bundle of documents and handed them to Hanley. The lieutenant noticed the amount of blood on the papers and the back of Saunders hand. "Saunders, how bad are you hit?"

Before Saunders could even answer, Doc was unzipping the sergeant's jacket.

"Hey there!" Saunders protested, as he actually noticed the medic for the first time.

Hanley tried to hold back a laugh. "Saunders, meet your new medic."

Saunders scowled as Doc pulled his shirts up to get a good look at the wound. The sergeant barked at the medic. "It's just a scratch."

Hanley patted Doc on the back. "Don't let him BS you, Doc."

"Look, Sarge, you need to let me clean this up and get a bandage on it." Doc continued, ignoring Saunders' protests.

Hanley laughed as he left Saunders with his new medic. "I can see you two are going to get along just fine!"

Doc looked at the lieutenant and then back at Saunders. "I'm almost done, Sarge. Then you should get some sleep, you're dead on your feet."

Saunders just tucked his shirts back in and shook his head. "C'mon, Doc. I'll introduce you to the rest of the squad. I'm sure Kirby has something you can look at." He chuckled quietly, turned and walked away with Doc in step right behind him.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Doc was startled back to the present by the sound of German voices. He looked for

cover behind some brush and found himself on the edge of an embankment. The Krauts continued to approach, and Doc had no choice but to slowly slide himself down the edge and into the ravine below. Once at the bottom, he was able to hide in the deep brush. The voices continued to get closer. Several rocks began to slide down the hill, and Doc feared the Germans were also coming down into the ravine. Gradually, the rock slide stopped and there was no sound of anyone coming down the embankment. Doc listened intently and relaxed as the voices got softer and seemed to continue along the top of the hill in the opposite direction he was moving.

The medic waited until he was sure the Germans were gone and slowly climbed out of the brush and began walking along the bottom of the ravine. There was plenty of brush on both sides to provide cover from anyone looking over the sides. But he couldn't take cover and walk at the same time. Doc stayed as close to the brush as he could while still walking as quickly and quietly as possible.

Doc had been hiking for nearly thirty minutes when a hand came across his mouth, and he was yanked off his feet into the brush. The wind knocked out of him, Doc closed his eyes disheartened that he had let Saunders and the squad down. He slowly opened his eyes to see a pair of bloodshot blue eyes looking back at him, and Saunders mouthing Krauts. The medic slowly nodded in recognition, and the sergeant removed his hand.

After several minutes, Saunders sat up and leaned against a tree. "Doc, what are you doing out here?"

Doc focused on Saunders' injuries in an attempt to avoid the sergeant's questions and the inevitable tongue lashing that would follow. "Sarge, let me look at the cut on your head."

"Doc, it stopped bleeding a while ago. You still haven't answered my question. What are you doing out here?"

Doc pulled some aspirin from his bag and handed them to Saunders. "I bet you have one hell of a headache."

"Thanks, Doc." Saunders winced as he reached for his canteen. "Who's out here with you?"

"Sarge, what happen to your side?" the medic asked, as he handed Saunders his.

Saunders took the canteen and gulped down some water with the aspirin. "Just bruised. Okay, Doc. What are you trying not to tell me?"

The medic accepted the unavoidable and answered. "I'm out here looking for you." He hesitated. "I'm alone."

"Doc, what were you thinking? You could have gotten yourself killed." Saunders growled without raising his voice. "And still might."

Doc proceeded to fill Saunders in on the status of the rest of the squad, Hanley, Second Squad, and how he ended up there with Saunders. Doc noticed the bandage wrapped around Saunders' calf as he finished catching the sergeant up. The medic looked at the blood soaked bandage. "Sarge, shouldn't I look at that?"

"Not now, Doc. There is nothing you can do right now, anyway." Saunders tentatively stood up. "We need to get moving, Doc."

"Which way, Sarge? There were Krauts from the direction I just came."

"Yeah, and I've seen quite a few up above us as well." Saunders pointed to the side both he and Doc had come down. "I think we need to climb up on the other side." Saunders sized up the steepness of that side, which was actually much steeper than the first side.

"What about your leg?" Doc could see that Saunders was limping and climbing up the



embankment was not going to be easy.

Saunders subconsciously wiped his hand through his hair. "We don't have a choice, Doc. We have to get out of this ravine before we get trapped down here."

Working together, they were able to painstakingly, bit by bit, work their way up the steep embankment. Saunders peeked over the edge when they neared the top. He slowly crawled up and motioned for Doc to follow. Once they were both up, Saunders pulled out the map to get his bearings and set a course for where he believed were the American lines. They spent the next several hours moving further away from the American lines as they hid from and dodged Kraut patrols.

Saunders signaled Doc to stop and he sat down abruptly. "Doc, we appear to be pretty deep behind German lines. We need to find some place to hold up for the night." Saunders looked at the map. "There's a mine."

Doc settled himself next to Saunders on the ground. "How far? Gonna be dark soon."

"Doc, the mine is even deeper into Kraut territory. That'll make tomorrow more difficult."

The medic shrugged. "Sarge, we need to get through tonight first."

"Alright, 'bout a mile toward those hills." Saunders pointed as he folded up the map and stuffed it in his jacket. Saunders knew Doc trusted him, the sergeant just hoped he could get them back to the Americans before their luck ran out.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Saunders approached first when they reached the mine. The entrance was well concealed and there were no signs of any recent activity. He steadily moved toward the opening and entered. Saunders searched it fully and found the back half was sealed off.

A lantern hung from the large beam near the entrance. He unhooked it, gave it a quick shake and to his surprise the lamp felt full. Saunders signaled Doc in as he lit the lantern. He was happy to see the light was not visible from outside the mine.

Saunders sat propped against a wall, positioned close enough to the front to see and hear what was going on outside. Doc walked in and immediately noticed the NCO near the entrance. He sat down next to the sergeant and pulled a ration box from his bag. The medic tossed the box to Saunders. "You need to eat something."

The sergeant pulled out the contents of the box and opened them. Satisfied he was going to eat, Doc picked up the lantern. "Now, let me take a look at you."

Saunders nodded as he knew there would be no point in putting up an argument.

Doc could see Saunders was flushed and wondered what was causing the sergeant's fever. The medic cleaned and bandaged the cut on Saunders' temple. The wound was clean and didn't look to have any infection. "Sarge, why don't you let me take a look at your side?"

Saunders begrudgingly unzipped his jacket and untucked his shirts. Doc pulled up the shirts and could see a wide array of colors forming across the sergeant's rib cage. Saunders held his breath as the medic gingerly probed along the discoloration. "Nothing broken, but you've got a real nice bruise goin' there."

Saunders let out his breath and smiled. "Thought I could use some color."

Doc moved down to look at Saunders' leg injury. He put his hand on Saunders' leg and could feel the heat coming from the wound. "Sarge, I thought you said this wasn't anything."

Saunders gave the medic a crooked grin. "I believe what I said was, 'There was nothing you could do about it back there.'"

Doc took the bandage off and could see the injury had bled significantly. He ripped open Saunders' pant leg so he could a good look at the wound. "What happened?"

"Grenade. I pulled out a metal fragment."

Doc could see Saunders' calf was very red and swollen. The wound was closed over, but already showed signs of infection. "Sarge, I'm going to have to open this up to clean it

out.”

“Do whatever you need to do, Doc.” Saunders began to mentally prepare himself for the pain that would follow.

Doc pulled out a small scalpel and clean bandages from his bag. He wet one of the dressings and held it next to the lantern. Doc warmed the bandage as much as possible and pressed it on Saunders’ leg. He looked over at Saunders, who nodded for him to go ahead. The medic lifted the bandage, took his scalpel and lanced the wound. Saunders flinched as the scalpel cut his skin and clenched his jaw as Doc worked on the leg. Doc continued to squeeze the poison out until clean blood flowed. While he worked, Doc could feel every muscle tensed as the sergeant struggled to stay still. Once he finished, Doc sprinkled sulfa on the wound and wrapped it with a clean bandage. “Wasn’t too bad, Sarge. I just need to keep a close eye on it.”

Saunders slowly released the tension in his body and unclenched his jaw. “Sure, Doc.” He pulled out a Lucky, lit it, and wiped the moisture from his brow with the back of his hand. Saunders inhaled slowly and let the nicotine calm him.

Doc handed Saunders some aspirin and his canteen. He could see the weariness in the sergeant’s face. “Sarge, why don’t you get some sleep? You’re exhausted. I can keep a look out.”

“No offense, Doc. But we’re in Kraut territory and I need to stay awake.”

“None taken.” Doc smiled. “I can only hear the Germans. Not sense them like you can.” He sat back against the wall with Saunders, placing the lantern between the two of them. He looked at Saunders and grinned. “I’ll just have to keep talkin’ to you to keep ya awake.”

Saunders snorted. “Well it could be worse. You could be Kirby!”

“Speaking of Kirby.” Doc probed. “Why do you put up with so much?”

“Whaddya you mean, Doc?” Saunders eyed the medic, surprised by the inquisitive nature of the question.

“You know what I mean. Any other NCO would have busted him many times over by now. But you continue to bail him out and cover for him. Why?”

Saunders knew exactly what the medic was asking, but didn’t intend on giving in easily to the questioning. “Kirby’s a good soldier.”

Doc always suspected there was more to Saunders’ tolerance of Kirby’s antics and now he was sure of it. “Com’ on there’s more to it, Sarge.”

Saunders laughed and gave in. “I WAS Kirby. No. I was WORSE than Kirby!”

“I find THAT hard to believe.”

“Seriously, Doc. When I joined the Army, it was all about being wild and getting into trouble.” Saunders mused. “For the first time I could remember. I wasn’t responsible for taking care of anyone else.”

“Is that why you joined up? To get away from the responsibilities.”

“Seems funny now, but yeah, I thought that then. I just needed a chance to be on my own.”

“But that still doesn’t make you Kirby.”

Doc pointed out.

Saunders waved the medic off. “Long story, Doc.”

Doc gestured to their surroundings.

“We’re not going anywhere, and it’s gonna be a long night.”

There was an ease in which Saunders could talk to the medic. An unspoken trust existed with Doc. Saunders knew anything



discussed between them would never be repeated. He was reluctant at first, but once he started, the words began to flow easily. "I joined the Army in '42 and got orders to the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division out of Basic. Went to some specialized training. So they were already preparing for North Africa when I finally joined up with them. Pretty much stayed out of trouble when we were out on maneuvers. It was when we had down time I got into trouble." Saunders laughed. "Thankfully, we shipped out before I got a court martial."

"Are you sure you're not making this up?" Doc eyed the sergeant looking for clues to the truth.

Saunders held up his hand. "Just wait, Doc. I hadn't even begun getting into real trouble yet."

"Right before we shipped out I got assigned to the 60<sup>th</sup> Combat Team and we were part of the Port Lyautey landing. What a mess that was. We arrived late so lost our element of surprise. The weather was bad and several landing craft were smashed into the rocks. Who would have known at the time that was going to be my easiest landing!" Saunders shook his head as he looked somberly down at the ground. "We ran into heavy opposition in French Morocco with the Foreign Legion and had quite a fight on our hands to take Kasba-Mehdia. Our Combat Team took the heaviest losses." He shifted his legs and stared out the cave entrance into the darkness.

Saunders looked back at Doc who quietly watched as the sergeant suppressed his memories. "That's when I got promoted to Corporal ..." Saunders grinned "the FIRST time."

"The first time huh? Kirby would love to hear about this." Doc pressed Saunders to continue.

"We ended up staying in Port Lyautey for three months. Basically all we did was guard the Spanish Moroccan border and drink vin rouge. Me and Grady started getting into some real trouble." Saunders chuckled to himself and shook his head as he reflected on Grady and their friendship. "Boy, did we get into a mess of trouble. Grady and I used to have a saying, 'Guide books don't tell the whole story!'"

Doc had heard the story of how bad Saunders took Grady's death. It was nice to hear the happier side of the Saunders - Long friendship.

"Anyway, I got reprimanded and put on report several times for being where I wasn't supposed to be, with who I wasn't supposed to be with. Eventually, got busted back down to buck private." Saunders continued, somewhat embarrassed. "At the time losing the stripes didn't even bother me. I was actually kinda glad."

"Glad to get rid of the responsibility that went with those stripes?" Doc shook his head and smiled. He found it hard to comprehend they were talking about the same Saunders he knew.

Saunders looked at the medic; he was always amazed at how well Doc understood him. "In late March, we finally got back into the business of war at Maknassy. We launched our attack at night. We got lucky and caught the Germans by surprise and got the high ground behind them." Saunders smirked. "Still took almost three weeks to run the Krauts out."

Doc thoughtfully listened as Saunders continued to recount his experiences in North Africa. The medic did not press for any more details than Saunders was already willing to share.

"Then we had to fight through the jungle brush in the Sedjenane Valley northeast of Tunisia as we drove upon Djebel Dardys. You would have thought we were fighting in the Pacific somewhere. It was almost impenetrable



at times. We could only crawl on our hands and knees to get through it. Then once we finally did get to the top we were out numbered and pounded by artillery four straight hours.”

Doc joked. “Guess that got you prepared for the hedgerow over here.” Doc knew Saunders was minimizing the extent of the fighting. “Hey, wasn’t your unit awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation for that?”

Saunders gave Doc a curious look. “Yeah we were. How’d you know that?”

“I met two medics from the 60<sup>th</sup> back in England. They were telling me about North Africa. One of them talked about the jungle fighting and getting the unit citation.” Doc hesitated and then cautiously asked. “How’d you come through?”

“I got a piece of shrapnel in my side.” Saunders gave Doc a quick smirk. “Just a scratch. Also, got one stripe back ... and a Bronze Star.”

Doc was surprised Saunders was willing to admit the medal, though he said nothing regarding it and only laughed. “Did you manage to keep your stripe this time?”

“Barely.” Saunders answered sheepishly. “Afterwards we were sent to Algeria for seven weeks. Seven weeks with nothing to do.”

It was so damn hot! We were ordered to take naps from 1-3 everyday. The nearest town was 50 miles and they had regular convoys to take us into town every day.” Saunders pulled out a Lucky and lit it. “Of course, you weren’t necessarily authorized to go every day.” Saunders laughed. “But me and Grady somehow made our way onto those trucks several times a week.”

Doc teased. “Now I’m seein’ the similarities with Kirby!”

“Then one night we missed the truck back to camp.” Saunders looked down shaking his head. “Shoulda cost me that stripe.”

“But it didn’t?”

Saunders shook his head. “Next morning my squad leader was the first one off the truck. Sees me and Grady standing there. Tells Grady to get his ass back to camp and takes me for a long walk. Proceeded to chew my butt out.” Saunders reflected. “Changed everything.”

“That must have been some chewin’ out!” Doc wondered if that was where the Saunders’ pep talk had borne life.

“Basically, he told me, ‘Like it or not you’re a leader. The guys follow you. You can choose to lead ‘em into trouble and eventually get ‘em killed. Or you can choose to lead ‘em home safely. You need to decide which it’s going to be here and now.’”

Doc smirked. “Guess you could only hide from who you were for so long.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Saunders agreed. “So, I started to straighten out. Plus not long after we moved out to prepare for the Palermo landing.”

“Heard that one was rough as well.” Doc quickly added.

“Aren’t they all?” Saunders reached for his pack of cigarettes and fished out a Lucky. “After the landing we were sent on a wide flanking move north. Through some of the worst mountain terrain I’d ever seen. Almost impassable. I spent almost all my time in Sicily fighting in the mountains and in the dark. After marching a hundred hours straight we finally infiltrated the German lines.” Saunders took a long drag from his Lucky. “Then we got ambushed. Only had five casualties ... could have been a lot more.”

“So is that when you were wounded?” Doc dug in his pack and pulled out a box of rations.

“Yeah, Doc, wounded pretty bad.” Saunders absentmindedly rubbed his shoulder. “How’d you know ... lucky guess?”

“It’s never been a secret you were wounded before you joined the 361<sup>st</sup>. Since that’s when you got the Silver Star. I figure that’s when you got wounded.” He grinned at the look on Saunders face.

Saunders shook his head. “How would you know about my Silver Star?”

"I've seen the medals dump out of your pack. A Silver Star is pretty hard to miss." Doc followed up. "Always wanted to ask about 'em."

"Yeah, got the Silver Star." Saunders wasn't upset with Doc. He was more self-conscious someone in the squad knew, even if it was only Doc. Saunders added. "I guess more importantly, got that second stripe back. Was sent to recover in Cefalu with the rest of the division. More wine, Marsala, and Vermouth. Stayed out of trouble for the most part." Saunders shot a mischievous look to Doc.

"You mean you didn't get caught this time." Doc understood the implications of Saunders look.

"I was wounded!" Saunders laughed.

Doc chuckled. "So how did you end up in the 361<sup>st</sup>?"

"When they sent the 9<sup>th</sup> back to England, they were also starting to ship over several new units. The Army decided to reshuffle some of the experienced soldiers into the less experienced outfits. They gave me a third stripe and transferred me to the 361<sup>st</sup>. I guess to give me my own squad."

"And the rest is history!" Doc glibly added.

Saunders finished his Lucky. "Okay, Doc. Enough about me. What about you?"

Doc shifted and pulled his knees up. "Was drafted in early '44."

Saunders nodded in acknowledgement. "How'd you end up a medic?"

"I guess the Army just needed medics when I came through. I actually wanted to be a cook. Thought that would be something I could do when I left the Army."

"Well, Doc. Being a medic suits you." Saunders added thoughtfully.

"Went off to corpsman school. They didn't really train you for war. I wasn't prepared for this."

Saunders fingered his Thompson. "None of us were."

"After they sent me through corpsman school I was assigned to the 4<sup>th</sup> Medical Battalion."

"So you came over D-Day?"

"On Utah." Doc hesitated. "Then once you guys broke through on Omaha, I was sent over there to help with the wounded."

Saunders could see the pain in Doc's eyes. "What is it, Doc?"

"I couldn't believe it. At first my mind couldn't comprehend what my eyes were seeing." There was sadness in the medic's eyes as he reflected. "There were so many bodies and body parts, so much blood. Guys who didn't even make it to the beach just floating dead in the water."

Saunders lit another Lucky as he also reflected on that day. "It was hell on earth. I'm surprised any of us made it off that damn beach."

Doc snapped himself back to the present and away from the beach. "After that I asked to be assigned to a combat unit. I wanted a chance to help as soon as guy was hit."

Saunders shook his head. "Explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Why I can't get you to stay back where you'll be safe!"

"What would be the point of my being here if I did that?"

Saunders took a drag from his Lucky. "Yeah, yeah, Doc. I've heard it before."

Saunders waved his hand. "Continue."

"Well obviously the divisions on Omaha were decimated pretty badly. I was transferred into the 361<sup>st</sup>, Third Platoon."

Saunders quipped. "So, you've been tagging along beside us along."

"I guess you could say that." Doc laughed.

"How'd you end up with us?"

"I was taking a couple of wounded back to the Aid Station ..." Doc's voice trailed off.

He took a long pause before he continued. "Rest of the unit ran into a Panzer Division and was wiped out."

Saunders could see the guilt overtake the medic. "Doc, you couldn't have prevented it if you were with them."

Doc's demeanor was sorrowful and he quietly added. "I should have been there with them."

"If you were, think where me and the rest of the squad would all be. We'd probably be dead somewhere. Doc, you weren't meant to die there." Saunders knew the guilt Doc was feeling; he'd felt it enough times himself.

Doc looked up, for the first time feeling some justification for his survival. "Thanks."

Both fell silent. Lost in thought, each reflected on how they had gotten to this place in time. What horrific things they had seen since being overseas. Saunders broke the silence. "So Doc, aren't you forgettin' somethin'?"

"What?" Doc wasn't quite sure what Saunders was referring to.

Saunders gave Doc a knowing grin. "I'm not the only one with medals."

"Oh, that." Embarrassed, Doc tried to end the topic. "Seems you already know 'bout it."

Saunders compelled Doc to tell his story. "Spill it."

"It all happened so fast. My unit was pinned down by machine gun fire. While the rest of the guys were working toward the machine gun, I started pullin' the wounded to safety."

"Runnin' into the line of fire, I assume." Saunders knew the medic well enough to know that his own personal safety was never a concern.

"Yea, I guess so." Doc grinned. "So they gave me a bronze star." Doc looked over at Saunders. "How'd ..."

"Ran into a buddy of mine that was there that day. He saw you with the squad and told me about it. Said we were lucky to have you. Told him we knew that!"

"You're right." Doc looked over at Saunders regretfully. "The medals don't mean anything."

"Ending this war and keepin' as many alive as we can. That's all that matters," Saunders concurred.

Doc asked with uncertainty, "Then what?"

Not liking the direction the conversation had taken, Saunders hesitated. "Whaddya mean, Doc?"

"When we go home. How do I go back to my life after all of this?"

Saunders looked at the ground and fidgeted with the Thompson. "Best not to think about home, Doc." Saunders' determined gaze and tone made it clear the conversation was over.

"Why? I've never understood that about you." Doc knew the moment the words came out, he had pushed too far. He knew the burden Saunders carried to keep them all alive and see them home safely.

Saunders irritated, responded. "I need to act and react. In order to do that, I need to focus only on the right here and now. Otherwise I'm no good to anybody."

Doc saw a resolve in Saunders and watched the mental barricade go up. Their conversation was over.

"Doc, get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a long day." Saunders gave a quick smile to let Doc know they were okay.

Doc returned the smile as he edged down. "Sure, Sarge."

Saunders blew out the lantern and stared into the darkness outside the mine. *I can't think about going home. I just have to get through this war one day, one hour, one moment at a time.*

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

At the first sign of daybreak, Saunders got up and stood at the mine entrance. He listened for any sound that didn't belong. Once he was sure there were none, he woke Doc. "Doc, we need to get moving."

Saunders studied the map as Doc got himself ready to head out. He knew where they were, knew where Phase Line Red was, but there was no way of knowing where the American lines were now.

Saunders was still studying the map when Doc walked up beside him. "Sarge, I should take a look at your leg this morning."

"It feels fine, Doc. See for yourself." Saunders didn't even look up from the map.

The medic bent down and looked at Saunders' calf. There wasn't much heat coming from the leg and the bandage was fairly clean. Doc assumed Saunders was downplaying his condition, but the leg in fact looked fine. "You're right, it looks pretty good." Doc stood up, shoved his hands in his pockets and heaved a heavy sigh.

Saunders could see Doc obviously had something else on his mind. "Alright, Doc. Out with it."

"Sarge, I think you should give me your pistol."

"Doc, you know I can't do that." Saunders folded the map and shoved it back into his jacket.

"I know a medic in the 84<sup>th</sup> that carries a forty-five. He doesn't even wear a Red Cross on his uniform."

"Doc, you do wear a Red Cross on your uniform." Saunders flicked the medic's Red Cross arm band. "I'm not giving you my Colt."

"You might need my help." Doc made one last pointless appeal.

Saunders shook his head. "Doc, one more weapon isn't gonna make a difference. And if you're found with a gun they'll shoot you."

Saunders settled on a direct approach toward the American lines. They would likely run into more Kraut patrols, but it couldn't be more dangerous than spending another day in Kraut territory. He realized the Americans would mount a counterattack sooner or later. Saunders just hoped he and Doc located the Americans before the Germans found them.

"Doc, if something happens ..."

Doc interjected, "Oh no, I'm not going to leave you."

"What if I'm dead?" Saunders pointed out. He knew getting the medic to leave him behind unless he was dead or captured would be impossible. "You need to keep heading south. Until you reach the river. Then follow the river west." He stared intently at Doc. "When the shelling starts. You just find somewhere to hide and wait for our guys to find you. You got that, Doc?"

"Okay, I got it."

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

The morning began as the previous day ended, hiding from and dodging Kraut patrols. It was late morning when they stumbled upon two wounded German soldiers. Saunders found it strange the soldiers were headed in the same direction as he and Doc; toward the American lines. A vehicle with four more German soldiers pulled up as Saunders and Doc observed from the hedgerow. The two Americans exchanged glances as they watched an altercation between the German soldiers. Without warning, one of the soldiers from the vehicle pulled out a Luger and shot the two wounded soldiers. Saunders and Doc sat in silence as the four soldiers got back in their vehicle and drove away.

Once the vehicle was out of sight, Saunders stood and ensured they were gone. Doc

ran up to check on the two soldiers but found they were both dead. "Sarge, what was that all about?"

"The group in car must have been SS." He pointed at the two dead Germans. "They must have thought these two were deserting or something."

Doc could not comprehend the inhumanity of the action. "But why shoot them?"

"Senseless brutality." Saunders shot a worried look at Doc. "If the SS are around, Doc ..."

The medic finished Saunders' thought. "We need to get moving."

They quickly moved out past the German soldiers. Saunders kept them hugging the hedgerow along the road. It allowed them a quick escape into hiding while maintaining an easier trail to follow and walk along.

It was late afternoon when Saunders signaled Doc into the brush. He moved forward to get a better look and saw three vehicles coming toward them along the road. Saunders quickly hid in the brush and looked back to make sure Doc was hidden. He felt a sense of alarm when he could see the red from the medic's helmet. The late afternoon sun shone directly where Doc was in the hedgerow. There was no way for Saunders to get back to the medic or to signal Doc as the cars approached. Saunders could only hope that the vehicles would be traveling too fast to notice the medic's helmet.

Saunders held his breath as the first vehicle slowly passed, then the staff car. He was just about to let out his breath when the third slammed on the breaks and the four soldiers inside bolted from the vehicle. The Germans were all over Doc within seconds.

They fired a shot in the air to flag down the first two vehicles as they dragged Doc from the hedgerow. Saunders' heart sank as he saw they were the same four soldiers he and Doc had seen earlier in the day.

The other two vehicles promptly returned and more SS soldiers piled out. Saunders could see there were two officers and nine others. Eleven total. How was he going to take out eleven SS soldiers without getting Doc killed? If they drove away he'd never be able to keep up. How would he find Doc again? Saunders' mind was racing. He realized he had to act before it was too late.

The SS Captain walked up to Doc and in perfect English began to question him. "American Medic, what are you doing out here all alone?"

Doc knew he was supposed to remain quiet. Only name, rank, and serial number, but he also knew in order to protect Saunders they had to believe Doc was alone. "My unit got wiped out in the fighting the other night. I got lost and couldn't find my way back to the American lines."

"So we have a little lost lamb." The SS Captain laughed and was joined by the others.

Doc remained subdued. "I never did have a very good sense of direction. Guess that's why the Army made me a medic."

The SS Captain's eyes narrowed as he pulled out his Luger and pointed it at Doc. He looked into the hedgerow and yelled. "I believe there is a shepherd watching over this lamb."

Saunders let out a deep sigh and lowered his head against the top of the Thompson. The SS Captain just removed all options for getting Doc and himself out of this unscathed.

The SS Captain smiled cruelly. "I suggest this shepherd come forward or watch his lamb slaughtered."

Doc tried to struggle free. He realized the only way to prevent Saunders from surrendering was if he forced the SS Captain to shoot him. "I told you. I'm alone."

"I know what you told me little lamb. I also see how mightily you struggle to save your shepherd." He put the Luger against Doc's



temple. "Come out NOW. Or watch your lamb die!"

Saunders threw the Thompson and Colt back into the hedgerow, stood up, and stepped out onto the road. With his hands raised, he faked a heavy limp as he walked toward the Germans. The SS soldiers grabbed Saunders and roughly removed his ammo belt, jacket, and emptied his pockets. He felt the pain in his side as they yanked at him. Saunders understood this was only the beginning.

"I see your shepherd is a sergeant. Sergeants are always so interesting to SPEAK with." The SS Captain snickered as he emphasized the word speak. "They know so much more about the war than they are given credit for." Saunders stood directly in front of the SS Captain. "Now the question is. Is this Medic your only lamb? Or are there other sheep in your flock?"

"I have a badly wounded leg. Doc has been trying to help me back to our lines." Saunders stared directly into the eyes of the SS Captain.

"Pity, your Medic didn't hide better. You were so close to making it. Less than a mile." He sneered as Doc's shoulders slumped. "Medic, you will remember your carelessness as you watch your sergeant's suffering." With that, he kicked Saunders' wounded calf, sending him to his knees.

Doc immediately tried to get to Saunders, but was held back.

Saunders glanced at Doc, seeing the grief in his eyes. "Not your fault, D..." Before Saunders could finish he was pushed face first into the ground from behind. He felt a heavy weight land on the middle of his back as all the air was pushed from his lungs.

"You will learn to only speak when spoken to!" The SS Captain instructed, as he lifted Saunders' head with the toe of his boot. "Do I make myself clear, Sergeant?"

Saunders defiantly made no attempt to answer. "Answer Captain Hoffen when he speaks to you," growled a voice from behind Saunders. The knee in his back dug in deeper as his shoulders were wrenched backwards.

Saunders gritted his teeth and hissed, "yes, Capt'n."

"Pick him up. He has a long walk and I want to be back before dark." Captain Hoffen ordered.

Saunders was hauled to his feet and he was tied to the back bumper of the staff car. Captain Hoffen entered the back seat and Doc was pushed in beside him. "Why am I riding?"

"Medic, you and I are going to get to know each other on a different level. You shall live our motto. Accept Death. Hand Out Death."

The tone in Captain Hoffen's voice and the coldness in his eyes sent a sense of terror deep into Doc. He had only felt this once before, when he first met Captain Steiner. Doc couldn't put his finger on it, but he was sure this was going to be much worse.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Captain Hoffen gloated during the ride back. He could not believe his luck to have found these two Americans. There was something different about these two. They were going to be a challenge and he needed a challenge. So many Americans freely talked or were easily tricked into giving up information. He did not think that would be the case with these two.

The captain saw from the very beginning each American would be willing to die for the other. The medic had tried to free himself to be shot before the sergeant was found out. The sergeant was obviously a combat veteran. He surely knew what awaited him when he surrendered. Captain Hoffen noticed there was a bond between these two he wanted to break. The captain would break them, just for the fun of seeing he could do it.

Captain Hoffen knew either American would be willing to undergo the pain and torture for the other. He needed to know who would suffer more anguish watching the other endure

the physical pain. The sergeant was a soldier. He might not like it, but he would do his duty either way. Captain Hoffen looked back at Saunders having trouble staying on his feet as the car kicked up rocks and dust into his face, he laughed. *The sergeant is strong and determined. He will be fun to break. Like breaking a wild stallion back home.*

He turned and looked as Doc watched Saunders, his fingers dug into the back of the seat, the anguish in his eyes. *Medics help soldiers, how bad will the torment be when he is not allowed to help the sergeant.* He closed his eyes and beamed. *I wonder how strong the medic's desire to stop the sergeant's suffering will be. How far will he be willing to go?*

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

They finally stopped and Saunders dropped to his knees gasping for air. Doc immediately tried to get to him, but was prevented. He pleaded to Captain Hoffen. "Can't I at least give him some water?"

Captain Hoffen looked at Saunders, drenched in sweat and still struggling to catch his breath. "If the sergeant can make it here to you. Then you can give him water."

Saunders wasn't sure he could even stand. His legs were weak and quivered as he attempted to force himself up. Surprised they were able to hold his weight; he was finally able to stand. Saunders looked at the rope tying him to the back of the car. The rope had frayed and pulled apart during the drive. It wouldn't take much effort to break. He gulped, collected all the strength he could gather and yanked. The rope broke free. Saunders grinned and stumbled over to Doc.

Doc pulled out his canteen and handed it to Saunders. Saunders guzzled the water and Doc watched the blood drip from the sergeant's wrists where the rope had cut deep into them. Saunders emptied the canteen not knowing when he might get the chance to drink again. He wiped his mouth. "Thanks, Doc."

Their victory was short as they were lead into two separate fenced areas. The two areas had entrances on opposite ends of each other and shared one common fence. That was where the similarities ended. Doc was put into a compound that could house many prisoners. It had an old garage for shelter and a functional water pump in the middle. Saunders, on the other hand, was put in basically a cage with no shelter or water. The gates were locked and the two Americans were left alone. Doc immediately walked over towards Saunders. "Sarge, how ya doin'?"

Saunders staggered to meet Doc. "I'm okay."

"Let me untie your hands." Doc started to reach through the fence.

Saunders pulled back. "Doc, stop!" Saunders looked at the fence suspiciously. He took off his belt and threw it such that the buckle hit the fence. Sparks flew as the metal hit. "I was afraid of that. You have to be careful not to touch the fence."

Saunders put his wrists up next to the fence. Doc very carefully reached his fingers through the fence and worked the ropes free to untie Saunders' hands. "So got any ideas on how you're gonna get us out of here?" Doc grinned.

Saunders laughed. "Not yet, Doc. Not yet." Saunders rubbed his hands to get the blood back circulating.

Two of the soldiers came out and brought food into Doc. Nothing was brought to Saunders. Doc immediately brought his food over to Saunders and they carefully shared through the fence what little there was.

The medic waved to the separate enclosures. "Sarge, whaddya think this is all about?"

Saunders sat back, with his arms on his knees and surveyed the area. "I'm not sure, Doc. But they don't seem to mind you helping me as long as I can get to you."

Doc was sure he didn't like the ominous sound of that. "What do you mean as long as you CAN get to me?"

“Doc, you remember what it was like when Steiner worked us over. There are going to be times when they are going to throw me in the gate over there.” Saunders pointed to his entrance, which was about eight feet from their common fence. “I’m not going to be able to make it over here.”

“So you think this is about me not being able to help you.” Doc saw the stage that was being set.

“Yeah, yeah I do.” Saunders looked around. “Doc, you need to be careful how you react.”

Doc gave Saunders a look of concern and apprehension. “Whaddya mean?”

“What they intend to do to me. Well, that’s pretty obvious.” Saunders considered a moment on what he was likely in store for. “But with you. I have feeling it could be worse, Doc.”

“How can it be worse?” The medic was absolutely sure nothing could be worse than what they both feared was intended for Saunders.

“I think this is a lot less about what they are planning for me. And a lot more about how you react to not being able to help me. Doc, they didn’t even take away your bag.”

Doc looked down at his bag. “They didn’t even take away the five vials of morphine I have.”

Saunders sat quietly as he mulled over their options. “We need to figure out a way to use this to our advantage.”

“You let me know when ya got that figured out.” Doc grinned.

“Yeah, I will. In the meantime, tell them you smoke.” Saunders chuckled as he patted his empty shirt pocket. “I could sure use a cigarette.”

The temperature had begun to fall as the sun set. Saunders looked toward the shelter. “Doc, you need to go inside and get some sleep.”

“I’m not going in there with you out here.” The medic was adamant.

Saunders stayed practical as ever. “Look, Doc. I need you to eat, drink, sleep, stay warm and keep your strength up. When we get out of here, I’m going to need you to get me back.” To make his point, Saunders walked away from the medic and laid down.

Doc gave Saunders one last apprehensive look and walked inside the old garage.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Captain Hoffen watched the two Americans. He laughed as Saunders tested the fence to see if it was electric. *I must not underestimate this sergeant.* The captain had been right about the strength of the sergeant as he watched Saunders walk away, appearing to instruct the medic to take refuge in the garage. These two were indeed going to be a great challenge.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Sometime after Doc went into the garage, they came for Saunders. Saunders heard them coming and stood to meet them at the gate. They walked the sergeant into the large building, where Captain Hoffen awaited him. Saunders paused to survey the inside of the building as they entered. It seemed to be some sort of old factory. There was just one room with a small window overlooking the front grounds and only the one door. In the far corner there was what looked to be an old bath tub and a table with several sticks, whips, and other tools. The ceiling was very high and several ropes, chains, hooks, and even a noose hung from it. Saunders felt his stomach tightening. The soldiers laughed and pushed him forward.

“Sergeant, I think it is time we were formally introduced. I am Captain Hoffen of the Waffen - SS. I have been specially trained in Verschärfte Vernehmung by Gestapo chief Müller.”

Saunders took a sidelong glance to see in addition to the Captain, the lieutenant, sergeant, and the two soldiers who brought him in. “Saunders. Sergeant. Serial Number 227 06 22.”

“Sergeant Saunders. You will soon learn our Enhanced Interrogation methods are quite effective.” Saunders showed no reaction as he stared at the SS Captain. Captain Hoffen began to unbutton his coat. “Unfortunately for you, Sergeant Saunders. Serial Number 227 06 22, information is not all I am looking for.” He smiled as he nodded to the others. “But you’ve already guessed that, haven’t you?”

Saunders was immediately grabbed from behind and held by the two soldiers as the SS Sergeant pulled a rope from the ceiling and tied it around Saunders’ wrists. The rope was pulled so Saunders’ arms were stretched as far as possible over his head until his feet no longer touched the ground. His shirt was ripped open pulling all the buttons loose where they fell harmlessly to the floor.

“Now Sergeant, we were not as successful as we had hoped pushing the Americans back. Your troop strength was stronger than we anticipated. How many American units are deployed in this sector?”

“Saunders. Serg ...” Saunders response was halted by a blow to the midsection with a rubber nightstick. Saunders tried to catch his breath as another blow struck his upper thigh. Saunders glared at the SS Captain as he clenched his jaw tightly. “Sergeant ...” He felt a crack as the stick made contact with his ribs.

“Before we are done Saunders. Sergeant. Serial Number 227 06 22. You will beg to die. But WE will not kill you.” Captain Hoffen snapped his fingers and the SS Lieutenant brought him something from the table.

Saunders noted the inflection used when the captain said “we.” *Does he mean for Doc to kill me?* His thought was cut short as Saunders became aware of what the lieutenant had handed Captain Hoffen. The captain held a soldering iron in his hand as he approached the sergeant. Saunders watched as the threads of his undershirt started to burn. He felt tears flood his eyes as his skin burned and he smelled burnt flesh.

The cycle of interrogation; question, non response, beating and burnings continued until just before daybreak. There were rips and stains on his pant legs and his undershirt was covered with charred holes where the soldering iron had been used on his chest.

Captain Hoffen was amazed Saunders had remained conscious through the entire interrogation and never cried out. “Sergeant, I must say your tenacity is impressive.” The disheveled captain buttoned his coat and combed his hair. “It will make it even more enjoyable when I finally break you.”

The SS Sergeant cut open the back of Saunders’ shirt and undershirt from the collar down and they were torn open. From behind Saunders could hear the crack of a whip. He stifled a moan as the whip snapped into the flesh of his bare back. As the whip continued to slash across his back, Saunders struggled to stay conscious and held back his groans.

Saunders glanced up at Captain Hoffen when the thrashing finished. Captain Hoffen returned Saunders’ glance with a cruel smile as a bucket of salt water was thrown on the



sergeant's raw and shredded back. Saunders screamed in immense agony and finally weakened into unconsciousness.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Doc woke with a start. The medic wasn't sure if he dreamt a scream or actually heard a scream. Doc was surprised it was morning already and cursed himself for sleeping so long. He walked into the yard and his heart sank as he saw Saunders was nowhere to be seen. Doc stared at the factory building and listened intently for any sounds. There were none.

The medic paced back and forth along the common fence for what seemed like a lifetime. Two soldiers finally dragged Saunders' lifeless body out of the factory and opened the gate. They laughed as they dumped him face first along the fence farthest from where Doc stood watching. Saunders did not move or make a sound when his body hit the ground.



Doc was sickened by what he could see. Saunders' shirt was torn and hung only around his shoulders and arms. All that remained of his undershirt in back was the collar around his neck. Saunders' back was a criss-cross of red welts and bloody stripes. His pants were soaked with blood.

While Doc could not actually tell if Saunders was breathing or not, he assumed he was. "Sarge, can you hear me?" Doc kneeled in front of the fence parallel with Saunders' body. "Sarge, you've got to wake up." Tears filled the medic's eyes and his voice cracked. "Sarge, I can't help you if you don't get closer to me." He remembered Saunders warned him to be careful how he reacted. Even though everything inside him cried out to beg them to let him help Saunders, the medic sat back and crossed his legs. In a calm southern drawl he began holding vigil and talking to the unresponsive sergeant.

"Sarge, did I ever tell you about my family? You know I'm from Arkansas, born and raised in the same little town. Population fifteen hundred." Doc chuckled. "If you count livestock." The medic pulled his knees up to his chest. "We lived in town and ran the grocery store. That's why I just always 'sumed I'd be a grocery clerk."

Without moving his head, Doc glanced toward the window to confirm his audience was watching. "I was pretty good in school. Maybe that's why the Army made me a medic. Whaddya think about me becoming a doctor after the war? Nah, I can't really see it either."

Doc continued to speak to Saunders with a calm assurance. "I grew up the youngest with three older sisters." The medic forced himself to laugh. "They'd all three love you. Matter fact, they'd probably fight over which one got first crack at ya. That would be a sight to see!" He could see agitated movement in the window out of the corner of his eye.

"In the summer I'd spend all my free time fishin'. Hey Sarge, maybe when we win this ole war we can go fishin' together. Whaddya say, Sarge?" Doc noticed Saunders stirring. "Sarge, I'm bettin' you fished growin' up. Is that why you go to the water when ya need to think?" Doc cleared his throat and continued to speak softly. "You find somethin' peaceful in the water, don't ya?" Saunders turned his head, opened his eyes, and looked at the medic.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Saunders wanted to stay in the safety of his mind. Yet he could hear a calm friendly voice reaching out to him. Saunders kept hearing the voice calling "Sarge" as if that was his name. He let the voice flow through him, comfort him. This voice made him feel safe. Somehow Saunders knew this voice was not responsible for the excruciating pain he was in. He stirred sluggishly. He needed to see this voice. Saunders slowly turned his head, opened his eyes, and saw Doc.

Saunders rasped, "Doc."

Doc could barely contain the relief he felt at seeing those blue eyes opened. "Sarge, I know you're hurtin'. But I need you to crawl over here to me."

Saunders closed his eyes.

Doc tried to control his emotions as best he could. "Sarge, don't leave me now. Stay with me, Sarge."

Saunders opened his eyes. He dug his fingers into the ground and slowly pulled himself inch by inch closer to Doc. All the while Doc continued to talk to him.

"So as I was saying. Don't think bein' a grocery clerk will work for me anymore." Doc again took a quick glance at the window, this time no one watched. "What about history teacher? I want to make sure the generations to come know what went on here and why this can't happen again."

It took almost an hour for Saunders to make it the few feet necessary for Doc to reach him through the fence. When Doc was finally able to see Saunders closer, what the medic saw was even worse than he could have imagined. Doc knew there really wasn't much he could do to help Saunders. He carefully poured water through the fence for Saunders to drink.

"Sarge, there isn't much I can do to help your back." Carefully, he tried to sprinkle some sulfa on the worst cuts. "What about the front?" Saunders closed his eyes and rolled over onto his back. Doc was shaken to see the burn marks all over Saunders' chest. "Sarge, you want some morphine?"

Saunders' eyes shot open. In a whisper the medic could barely hear, he instructed, "Doc, you've got to break the vials."

"Why? Sarge, you're not thinkin' straight."

"Doc, I know what I'm saying. Trust me. Break the vials!" Saunders implored as he lost consciousness.

Doc didn't understand Saunders' reasoning, but the medic knew enough to trust Saunders' judgment. He grabbed his bag and pulled out the vials of morphine. Doc started to break each one. He finished breaking the last vial when the SS Sergeant came running out of the factory followed by four soldiers. Doc smirked. *I trust you know what you're doing, Sarge.*

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

No one from First Squad had gone to see Lieutenant Hanley since they all got to the Aid Station. They made Sergeant O'Neill tell the lieutenant that Saunders was missing in action and presumed dead. Hanley asked about First Squad and why no one came to see him, specifically Doc. O'Neill only said the squad was still recovering themselves and Doc was busy helping with the wounded. Hanley didn't believe him, but let it go. He figured it was because of Saunders.

They told themselves the lieutenant needed to get his rest. Nevertheless they all knew it was just easier not to visit the lieutenant than to lie to him about where their medic was. It



had been three days since Doc had gone looking for Saunders.

As the lieutenant stood in front of them, they could no longer avoid telling him the truth. "Where's Doc? No one seems to know exactly where he is." Lieutenant Hanley looked at each member of First Squad as he waited for an answer.

Kirby was the first to say anything. "I told you it was a bad idea."

"What was a bad idea?" Hanley remained impatient.

"For Doc to go lookin' for Sarge alone." Kirby waved out in the direction where the front lines were.

Hanley didn't quite believe what he just heard. "Doc went looking for Saunders?"

"Yes, Sir." Cage quietly replied.

"Well, Cage and Littlejohn couldn't walk. Kirby couldn't hold a gun. And I had a concussion," Billy interjected.

"So WE couldn't go." Littlejohn finished.

Lieutenant Hanley raised an eyebrow. "So YOU couldn't go."

"Yes, Sir. So Doc went alone," Billy innocently responded.

Trying not to raise his voice, Hanley countered, "Let me see if I have this straight. You were all too injured to go AWOL to look for Saunders. So Doc, an unarmed medic, went behind enemy lines alone to look for him."

"It sounds worse when you put it like that, Lieutenant," Kirby pointed out.

Hanley yelled, "How else would like me to put it, Kirby?"

"Lieutenant, we just weren't going leave him out there alone. Not again." Cage presented their case.

Billy reaffirmed. "We couldn't do it to Sarge again, Lieutenant."

Littlejohn added, "And Doc was the only one in any shape to go."

Lieutenant Hanley suffered the same guilt for having left Saunders behind before and relented. "How long has Doc been gone?"

"Three days." Cage responded solemnly.

"Three days!" Hanley could not hold back his alarm. "Do we even know where he headed?"

Cage quietly answered. "He was going to start looking where Saunders had met up with Second Squad."

"Are we going to go look for them, Lieutenant?" Billy optimistically responded.

"NO, we are not. I've already lost an NCO and a medic. I don't intend to lose an entire squad." Hanley looked at their dejected faces. He promptly added, "We're getting ready to mount a counterattack. I'll see if our platoon can take that area."

The lieutenant walked away and First Squad somberly contemplated the likelihood of finding their sergeant and medic.

"I told ya there'd be hell to pay," Kirby quipped.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

The SS Sergeant and two soldiers grabbed Doc, while two others dragged an unconscious Saunders into the factory. Doc looked over the room and was sickened as he became aware he was standing in Saunders' blood. He could not even begin to imagine what they had done to Saunders earlier. Saunders was dropped at the feet of an angry Captain



Hoffen.

The SS Captain was already annoyed Doc had stayed calm when Saunders was brought outside. Doc had sat peacefully talking to Saunders, almost willing the sergeant within reach. Now to have the sergeant instruct the medic to destroy the vials of morphine had infuriated the captain. The sergeant would soon feel his wrath and the medic would watch. "Your sergeant might be too smart for his own good. But in the end, he will not change the unavoidable."

Doc innocently responded, "I'm not sure what you're talking about, Captain."

"I doubt that, Medic." Captain Hoffen kicked Saunders onto his back. Saunders moaned in pain. The others laughed in anticipation of the coming events. "Medic, do you know what Arrest Mit Verschaerfung is?"

Doc uneasily shook his head.

Captain Hoffen gloated. "Your sergeant is about to find out what that means."

"Haven't you already done enough to him?"

Saunders was pulled to his feet. His hands were tied tightly together behind his back and attached to a hook hanging from the rafters. The hook was raised until Saunders feet were pulled off the ground. His entire body weight rested on his curved shoulders and wrist joints bent backwards. Saunders immediately groaned in pain and his breathing became labored.

"Do not worry, Medic, THIS will not kill him." The captain looked away from Saunders to Doc. "So Medic, why don't you and I sit? We can have a nice long talk."

Doc was pushed into a chair that was placed right in front of Saunders' hanging body. "Alright, Captain. We'll talk. Why is it you hate medics so much?" Doc swore he saw Saunders grin.

"Medics are weak and are not able to make necessary life and death decisions in the field of battle."

"Or at least the decisions you agree with."

Captain Hoffen was surprised at the aggressiveness of Doc's response. Again these two Americans had shown to be a pleasant surprise. "Because they cannot accept death or hand out death!"

"I may not like it, but I can accept death." Doc thought about all the death he had seen since landing at Utah.

"Can you?" Captain Hoffen sniped. "You fight against it, even when it is inescapable."

"I don't make that choice." Doc sighed as he entered the battle of wills with the SS Captain.

Captain Hoffen continued to push Doc. "But you do make the choice to allow suffering?"

"It's not our place to hand out death." Doc felt somehow he was in a battle with the devil for Saunders' life.

"Not even if a soldier is enduring unmentionable pain?" Captain Hoffen toed Saunders' blood on the floor with his boot.

Doc remained steadfast. "No. I would not kill him."

Captain Hoffen pointed up at Saunders and criticized. "But you would make him endure more suffering even if it is inevitable that he will die?"

"I would help him as best I could." Doc tried not to dwell on the implication that Saunders had already been condemned to die.

Captain Hoffen was unrelenting. "What if he begs you to put him out of his misery? He cannot take anymore."

Doc knew there were many times he had considered giving a wounded soldier that extra dose of morphine to put him out of his misery. How could you not consider it? "I would try to ease his pain as best I could."

“You are weak, Medic. You will understand when your sergeant looks you in the eyes begging you to end his life.”

Now Doc understood exactly why Saunders had made him destroy the vials of morphine. Somehow Saunders knew and took away the decision Captain Hoffen hoped to force Doc into making. “That will never happen.”

“Medic, even the strongest soldier has a breaking point. We will find your sergeant’s!” The captain stood next to Saunders, grabbed a handful of hair, and yanked his head back. “And enjoy doing it.”

This banter continued back and forth for almost three hours as Captain Hoffen tried to push Doc to admit he would help Saunders die. The entire time Doc never took his eyes off Saunders. He could see the sergeant’s heart racing as he watched the sweat drip from every pore in Saunders’ body. Finally, Doc pushed back. “Captain, are you afraid to tell me your real reason for hating medics?”

“My father was a medic in the first war. He was not strong enough to put dying men out of their misery. He was weak, he left them to suffer, and it haunted him the remainder of his miserable life.” Captain Hoffen nodded to the others. They lowered Saunders down and cut his arms free. “He did not even have the courage to take his own pitiful life. I had to do even that for him. I was only ten at the time.”

Doc forced Captain Hoffen’s words to flow past him as he looked at Saunders curled up in a ball on the floor. He didn’t want to believe it was possible that Saunders would beg to die, but looking at him lying on the floor, Doc wondered how much more the sergeant could really take. He was still staring at Saunders when one of the soldiers grabbed his shoulders to lead him outside. As they left, Doc heard Captain Hoffen challenge. “Medic, we will see if you will not be willing to put an end to your sergeant’s suffering.”

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Lieutenant Hanley left Captain Jampel’s briefing and walked straight to First Squad. It wasn’t typical protocol, but he knew their moral was low and any bit of hope, no matter how small, might help. The squad barely looked up as the lieutenant approached. “At ease. Stay as you are.” He snapped sarcastically.

“Sorry, Lieutenant.” Littlejohn started to stand up.

Cage put out his cigarette. “What’s the word, Lieutenant?”

“Artillery will start just before daybreak. We’ll be moving up to get closer before it starts.” Hanley waited for the anticipated reaction.

“Are we going to be able to look for Doc and Sarge?” Billy asked eagerly.

Hanley very sternly instructed. “We are part of a counter-attack. Not a recovery mission.” He quickly added. “Now if we happen to find a missing medic or sergeant why we are moving through the same terrain we’ve been in before ...” The lieutenant was glad to see the squad look as encouraged as they had in days. “Now get some rest while you can.” Hanley smiled as he walked away, feeling a twinge of optimism himself.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Doc walked into the old garage. He wanted to be where they couldn’t see him, where Captain Hoffen’s eyes wouldn’t be watching his every move. The medic wanted to scream, but THEY would be able to hear him. Instead he beat his fists against the wall until they started to bleed. Doc wanted to bleed; he wanted to share in the pain Saunders was feeling.

Doc dropped to his knees and broke down crying. He buried his head in his hands and sobbed. The medic cried until he had no tears left. Finished, he picked himself up and walked back to the fence and waited.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Saunders was picked up and dropped into the old bath tub. He opened his eyes as he watched the soldiers bring buckets of ice water. They dumped the water in, pouring it directly on Saunders' head. He struggled to move, but two soldiers held him in place. They continued to dump water on his head and mocked him as he began to shiver. Saunders' hands went numb and he could feel goose bumps all over his body.

Once the water was deep enough, they began to dunk him. Several hands held his head and shoulders under until he stopped struggling. When they let him up, Saunders coughed and choked, gasping for air. The soldiers joked as they dumped another bucket of water over his face.

This near drowning repeated until after dark and Saunders was beyond exhaustion. The soldiers laughed as they flipped on a bright spot light and the soaked sergeant was carried outdoors and dumped. The outdoor temperature had dropped considerably and Saunders shivered as the cool night air hit his wet body.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Second Platoon arrived at the location Second Squad had been pinned down. "Okay, we'll wait here. Once the artillery starts we'll move up and cross the river. There's a bridge a mile or so northeast of us that crosses a ravine." Lieutenant Hanley pretended not to notice as the men looked around for signs of Doc or Saunders. "Cage, Kirby, scout around and make sure everything's secure."

Hanley walked over to Sergeant O'Neill and pulled out his map. "Once we cross the bridge we'll split up. I'll take First Squad toward this old factory to the east." Hanley drew along the map with his finger. "O'Neill you'll take Third and what's left of Second Squad and continue northeast to this abandoned farm house. We'll circle around and meet here."

Lieutenant Hanley finished briefing Sergeant O'Neill as Cage and Kirby returned. Cage carried a camouflaged helmet in his hand. No question whose it was. Hanley looked it over. "Where'd you find it?"

"Up about two hundred yards." Cage pointed northeast.

Hanley hesitated. "Anything else?"

Kirby answered. "Nothin', Lieutenant. No bodies, no weapons, no equipment."

"We looked all around. There was no sign of him anywhere." Cage added.

"That's good, right? If he was a prisoner there'd be some other stuff, wouldn't there?" Billy optimistically asked.

Cage threw in, "Maybe he's with Doc."

"Sarge could be wounded," Billy worriedly added.

"How are we gonna find 'em, Lieutenant?" Littlejohn asked.

"Wait a minute. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We don't even know they're together and we don't know that Saunders is wounded." Hanley looked over Saunders' helmet as he held it in his hands. "Besides, they'll be able to find us when the fighting starts up."

An anxious Billy inquired. "But what about the artillery?"

"You know better than that. Saunders and Doc will be able to find cover." Hanley looked around at their faces. "Look, the best way we can help Saunders and Doc is to keep our minds on what we're supposed to be doing. Got it?" Before anyone answered, the shelling began.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Saunders shivered uncontrollably and drifted in and out of consciousness. Doc could see Saunders was suffering from hypothermia and could only imagine the infection likely raging from the sergeant's untreated wounds. The medic tried his best to reassure him. He talked to him continually whether the sergeant was conscious or not. When conscious, Saunders tried to talk to Doc about home. He coughed frequently and wheezed as he spoke, but asked Doc to tell his mom how much he loved her. "Doc, tell her how sorry I am that I didn't make it home."

Saunders talked about Tom being in the South Pacific and that Doc should make sure only Tom be told what really happened to his big brother. Saunders asked Doc to let Chris know the medic was with him in the end. Saunders was very adamant The Brat must never know what happened to him, this evil could not touch her. "Doc, she needs to keep her innocence." Doc was saddened by the finality in Saunders' voice and words.

The night progressed and Saunders' shivering became more violent. Doc worried at the pallor of Saunders' skin and the feverish sweat as he battled the effects of the torture and infections. The hypothermia progressed as his lips and fingers turned blue. The sergeant became more delusional and talked about Joey. The guilt he felt over his little brother's death gnawed at him, even now as his own death neared.

Saunders snapped back to reality when he heard the sound of American artillery in the distance. In that moment of clarity his shivering stopped and he looked directly at Doc. "I let you down. I'm sorry, Doc."

"What are you talkin' about, Sarge?"

"I don't think I can take anymore of this." Saunders lost consciousness one last time. *Sarge, you haven't let me down. You could never let me down.*

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Captain Hoffen and the guards walked in with Saunders. Doc stood up and with tears in his eyes yelled. "You can't do anything else to him. He's dead!"

The captain kicked Saunders brutally in the ribs. There was no sound or movement. Captain Hoffen pulled out his Lugar and pointed it at Saunders. "Are you sure he's dead?"

Doc had no idea if Saunders was really dead, but he might as well be. He knew Saunders trusted him to make the right decision. "Yes ... I'm sure."

The medic shut his eyes as he heard the shot from the Lugar. He opened his eyes as Captain Hoffen and the other soldiers were stepping over Saunders' body. Doc was startled as the SS Lieutenant and Sergeant grabbed him. He remained in a daze as they walked him into the factory.

Captain Hoffen walked in and handed Doc Saunders' dog tags. He reached into his coat pocket, pulled out Saunders' lighter and handed it to Doc. "Here Medic, something to remember your sergeant by. Keep this memento of the day YOU killed your friend." They all laughed.

Doc could still hear their laughing when the shelling started. Captain Hoffen started yelling orders and the others began grabbing items and taking them outside. The SS Sergeant stayed with Doc. The medic figured they were getting ready to move out. Doc didn't know if they were going to take him with them or just kill him. Part of him hoped they'd just shoot him. But the other part wanted to live to tell what had happened. Doc knew he needed to take Saunders' messages to his family.

The SS Sergeant started to move Doc toward the door. They had not quite reached the doorway when a shell hit the factory. Beams and debris came down on top of Doc and the sergeant. A large beam landed directly on the SS Sergeant crushing his body and cracking his skull. Doc had been shielded by the sergeant and did not have any major injuries. The medic could hear the others heading toward the factory. With little time to react, he wiped

some of the sergeant's blood on his jacket, buried himself under the debris and hoped they would assume him dead as well.

Doc heard someone enter the building. He held his breath as he felt some of the rubble being moved around. Someone kicked his back and lifted and dropped his arm and then he heard them walk away. Doc slowly let out his breath. He listened intently and heard the vehicles drive away. Doc couldn't tell if all three vehicles left and he didn't dare move for fear it was a trick.

Doc stayed perfectly still for what seemed forever, when he finally heard voices. He couldn't be sure what language they were speaking at first. But even the regular German Army would be better than the SS and what he had just endured. Doc slowly started to dig himself out from under the debris when he heard someone yell in a noticeably French accent. "Hey, Lieutenant. Someone's alive in here."

Doc tentatively called out. "Can someone help me?"

"Doc, Doc. Is that you?" Cage started pulling away the rubble and helped Doc to his feet. "Doc. Man I can't believe we found you!"

Cage and Doc went outside as Lieutenant Hanley walked up. Hanley saw the blood all over the medic. "Doc, are you ok?"

Doc looked down at the blood. "Yes, this isn't mine. A dead SS Sergeant in there. But mostly ..." The relief of being found was instantly replaced by grief. "Saunders' blood."

Cage started to go back into the building. "Is Sarge in there?"

"No." Doc fell to his knees and started rambling. "We were almost back ... They saw my helmet ... Sarge gave himself up ... I killed him."

At that moment, Kirby, Littlejohn, and Billy reached the building. "Whaddya mean you killed him, Doc?" Kirby shouted.

Doc told some of what happened after Saunders and he were captured by the SS. Afraid to see the pain he felt in their eyes, Doc didn't look at them as he spoke. He could hear them choke back tears as he told of what Saunders had endured. After he finished telling them how Captain Hoffen had shot Saunders, he finally looked into their faces.

Kirby angrily accused. "D'ya mean you just told 'em to shoot him?"

"Kirby, enough!" Lieutenant Hanley snapped. "Doc, you didn't kill Saunders. The SS killed Saunders." Hanley put his hand on Doc's shoulder trying to comfort the distraught medic. "Doc, where is Saunders?"

Doc pointed to the two fenced areas, his voice quivering. "In the smaller one."

Hanley nodded for Cage to check for Saunders' body.

Doc looked up at Kirby with tears in his eyes. "This Captain Hoffen, he made Steiner look like a Sunday School Teacher. It was all just a game to him."

"But Doc, Sarge was a fighter. He could have hung on 'til we got here."

"Kirby, Sarge fought all he could. You don't know everything they did to him. I don't even know ..." his voice trailed off. Finally he continued. "We don't want to know."

Cage ran back. "Not there."

"What do you mean, not there?" Hanley questioned.

"Lieutenant, I looked all over. Saunders is not here." Cage looked from Hanley to Doc. Hanley quietly asked, "Doc, could they have buried him."



“There wasn’t enough time, Lieutenant. The shelling started.” Doc looked at Hanley. “Why would they take his body?”

Lieutenant Hanley had no answers. “I don’t know.”

“To hide the evidence and bury him somewhere else,” Kirby snorted.

Littlejohn interrupted. “Lieutenant, Sergeant O’Neill’s on the radio for you.” He continued as he looked at Doc. “O’Neill says they have a bunch of SS pinned down at the farmhouse.”

Doc quickly jumped to his feet.

“Doc, are you sure you’re up for this?” Hanley questioned.

A determined Doc did not waiver. “I’m sure, Lieutenant. I’ve got to see this to the end.”

Hanley got on the radio and told Sergeant O’Neill to keep the farmhouse surrounded. He and First Squad were on the way. Hanley also let O’Neill know these SS men were likely the same ones who tortured and killed Saunders. Hanley handed the radio back to Littlejohn. “Alright. Let’s get moving.”

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Sergeant O’Neill met Lieutenant Hanley, when the lieutenant and First Squad arrived at the farmhouse. “We’ve got the house completely surrounded, Lieutenant. They aren’t gettin’ out of there alive.”

“Good. How many?”

“Not sure, Lieutenant. They were already inside when we got here. I figure the three vehicles held twelve at the most and we killed two when they tried to get back to the staff car.”

“Probably trying to get something out of the car to destroy before we could get our hands on it,” Hanley surmised.

Doc, who had been staring at the farmhouse since they arrived, spoke quietly. “There are eight of them inside.”

“How can you be sure these are even the same ones?” Sergeant O’Neill doubted Doc really knew for sure.

Doc spoke with a tremor in his voice. “They tied Sarge to the back bumper of THAT staff car. The two dead soldiers were the ones who always carried him outside after the torture. Always laughing as they threw him to the ground.”

There was a fire in the medic’s eyes and the rage in Doc’s voice grew. “I can tell you what every one of them looked, smelled, and sounded like. How each of them laughed as they tortured him.” His eyes still did not waiver from the farmhouse. “Yes, I’m sure they are the same ones!”

“Alright, Doc. We’ll get them.” Hanley nodded for Sergeant O’Neill and the rest of First Squad to move out.

The members of Second Platoon fought back the urge to uncontrollably charge the farmhouse. They had the SS surrounded and knew the Germans would soon run out of ammunition. So they cautiously commenced a calculated assault, slowly picking off the SS soldiers one by one. Lieutenant Hanley never offered or even considered the option for them to surrender.

Eventually, Cage got himself close enough to a side window to toss in a couple of grenades. After the explosion, Kirby and Billy rushed in the back door and opened fire.

Cage came around to the front of the house and met up with Sergeant O’Neill by the staff car. “Why don’t we see what was so important for these two to coming running out here for.” O’Neill stepped over one of the dead SS soldiers.

Cage started to open the front passenger door when he was drawn by something unexplainable in the backseat instead. “Oh my god, Sarge.”

Sergeant O’Neill looked over his shoulder. “What is it, Cage?”

Cage looked back at O'Neill. "Not you. Saunders." Cage quickly climbed onto the backseat to get a look at Saunders. He was astonished to hear a faint wheezing sound. Cage reached down to confirm Saunders had a pulse. "He's alive! Help me get him out of here." Sergeant O'Neill and Cage gently lifted Saunders off the floor and out of the car.

Littlejohn walked up and saw O'Neill and Cage lifting Saunders out of the car. The large private hastily threw his jacket down for them to lay Saunders on. He knelt by Saunders. "Look what they did to him."

Cage knelt on the other side of Saunders. "Littlejohn, he's alive."

Sergeant O'Neill stood staring at Saunders' injuries. He turned to look for Hanley while he shouted for Doc. "Doc! Doc, Hurry!"

Hanley and Doc came on the run as they saw O'Neill, Cage, and Littlejohn around someone on the ground. Doc froze as he saw the ripped sergeant's stripes hanging from the tattered shirt. His heart stopped and his feet wouldn't move. Then he heard a voice that sent a cold chill up his spine.

"So we meet again, Medic. I underestimated you both." A critically wounded Captain Hoffen stood grinning at Doc. Billy and Kirby held him up as he was bleeding profusely from a wound in his side. Doc lunged at the SS Captain, grabbing him by the throat and strangling him.

"Doc, he's alive." Hanley yelled. "He's alive, Doc." Hanley grabbed the back of Doc's shoulders. "Doc! Saunders is alive!"

Hanley's words sunk in and Doc released his grip on the captain's throat. Quickly he went to Saunders and fell to his knees at Saunders's side. Doc said nothing as he laid Saunders head in his lap and tears flowed down his cheeks.

Captain Hoffen choked out his last words. "I told you. WE would not kill him." Kirby and Billy dropped the dead captain.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

When Saunders finally woke he found himself in an Evac Hospital. Lieutenant Hanley sat quietly next to him. "How you feeling, Saunders?"

In a raspy voice Saunders responded. "I've been better, Lieutenant." Saunders gave a faint smile. "How long have I been here?"

"You've been out for six days. Briefly woke up a couple of times, but went right back to sleep. Your body needed to recover." Hanley lit a Lucky and handed it to Saunders, as he dropped the rest of the pack on his cot. "You've been through a lot."

Saunders grimaced as he felt a pull of the healing skin on his back. "How ..." he paused.

"You're going to be fine. Everything is healing, doctors expect a full recovery." Hanley continued. "You'll be back out with the squad in no time."

Saunders looked around with concern. "Lieutenant, where's Doc?"

"Take it easy, Doc's fine."

Saunders could read the apprehension in Hanley's face. "What is it, Lieutenant? What happened to Doc?"

"Doc blames himself," Hanley wavered and then followed up with, "for all you went through."

"That's crazy, Lieutenant. Doc kept me alive."



Hanley shook his head. "Doc doesn't exactly see it that way. We've all tried to talk to him. He's requested a transfer out of combat."

"You ALL need to stop feeling like you somehow let me down and guilty about what happens to me in this damn war."

"That's real ironic coming from you." Hanley laughed.

Saunders laughed as well. "Where is he?"

"He's been standing vigil in that doorway behind me since they brought you in."

"Lieutenant, go tell him I need to talk to him." Saunders called after Hanley.

"Lieutenant, you won't need to put that transfer request through."

Hanley grinned. "Haven't had time to do the paperwork yet."

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

As Doc sat down, Saunders tried to sit up. "Take it easy there, Sarge. Let me help ya." Doc propped Saunders up against a pillow. "How's that?"

"Good." Saunders took a Lucky from the pack Hanley had left and snapped open his Zippo. He lit the Lucky and gave Doc a wry grin. "So exactly where should we go fishin'?"

Doc gave Saunders a puzzled look. "You heard all that?"

Saunders took a deep drag and replied with a straight face. "Of course, Doc. I listen to everything you say."

"You may hear everything I say. I'm not sure you listen."

"Be careful Doc, I just might marry one of your sisters," Saunders joked.

"You have no idea what you'd be in for."

Saunders smiled. "Can't be as bad as puttin' up with Kirby."

"We better get you back in the field as soon as possible, before you completely forget what that's like!" Doc exclaimed.

Saunders smirked. "Maybe I'll just stay here for a while. See what kind of trouble I can get into."

"Lookin' to revert back to your old ways, Sarge?" Doc grinned.

"You just never know, Doc."

"I know."

They both laughed.

It wasn't necessary for Saunders to tell Doc everything was okay and it wasn't his fault. The words didn't need to be spoken.

\*\*\*      \*\*\*      \*\*\*

Hanley stood back, watching with a twinge of jealousy at the ease with which Saunders and Doc spoke and laughed. Saunders had immediately relieved Doc of his guilt when no one else even came close. The lieutenant knew he and Saunders respected each other, were friends, but they did not share the same bond Saunders and Doc did. The medic was able to get past the



barriers Saunders put up to everyone else. Hanley could only imagine what secrets Doc knew about Saunders. There was a trusted bond with Doc that Saunders shared with no one else.

The End

*The following is a quote from an actual WWII medic:*

*"I served with the 84th Infantry Division, (Railsplitters) I was attached to Company B-333 Inf. as a company aid man. Unlike the vast majority of (medic's) I carried a .45 Pistol throughout the war, I was well aware that if captured with that weapon I would be shot, but I still took my chances. I wore no red cross on my uniform, and I traveled in combat along side of the infantrymen. There were numerous times when tending to the wounded the Germans fired on me, and I fired back. My job was to deliver back to the battalion aid station all those who were wounded, and that's exactly what I did. I'm not ashamed to admit I violated the rules of war, and I would do it again if I was once again in that position. Which at my age, those days are long gone. I never thought of myself as some kind of hero, I wasn't, I had a job to do and I did it as best as I could. I won no medals, because I chose not to accept any. The only honor I chose was that I did my job as best as I could and I assisted in bringing home alive, many who would have died if left on the battle field unattended. Every medic performed his duties as they saw fit, I never question that, I knew the risk I was taking, but I also knew that the German would just as easy kill the wounded as they would those that were not. Did I at anytime, shoot and kill a German soldier? you damn right I did, just as those medic's who served in the pacific war, where the Japs would shoot any soldier whether they wore a red cross or not.*

*I wasn't the typical medic, and I knew that. I would admit that the rest were far braver than I was, they took chances in tending to the wounded, as was required by the rules of war. I have no regrets concerning my actions. I had never failed to tend the wounded. And those that I did returned home alive, and that was the only medal that I wanted, seeing them being transported back home."*