

What's The Point?

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Saunders stumbled into the burned out shop. He wondered if dropping Hamilton and Langston's dog tags on Hanley's makeshift desk would suffice as his report. He knew it wouldn't. He could hear Hanley now. "What happened? You weren't supposed to make contact." The sergeant wished someone would remember to brief the Germans. It was just supposed to be a two day recon patrol out to Hill 26 to see what the German buildup looked like. Hanley's last words were, "avoid contact at any cost."



Hanley's back was to Saunders, and he appeared to be getting an earful from someone on the phone. As Saunders slumped against the wall waiting for Hanley, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket. Grabbing a Lucky from the pack, Saunders inhaled deeply as he lit it. He dejectedly remembered the events of the last two days.

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Hamilton and Langston joined the squad right before Hanley sent them all out on patrol. Saunders knew the moment he looked at the two of them, the squad was in for trouble. Neither one looked to be older than fifteen or sixteen, though they both were twenty. They were just out of basic – as green as green could be. The two recruits couldn't have been more opposite. Hamilton was a young punk who thought he knew everything, and Langston was so scared he was having trouble remembering to breathe. In the end, it didn't matter how opposite they were, they both died just the same.

Saunders argued against taking them on the patrol, but Hanley would have no part of it. Keeping them both alive as well as maintaining the safety of the rest of the squad was going to take every ounce of energy Saunders had. Too bad he had just returned from two days out with an injured Sergeant O'Neill's squad.

As he looked at the two newest squad members, Saunders wished he hadn't been so quick to assure Hanley he was fine to go out again right away. The patrol started off routine enough, with Kirby complaining about everything from the weather, to his sore feet, to how heavy his BAR was.

It was shortly after they started back the second morning when they spotted the Kraut patrol. The Germans were out in the open unaware of the Americans. The squad was in good cover, so there was a good chance that the Kraut patrol would have passed them by. That is if Langston hadn't tripped over a tree log.

Even with that, Saunders was sure they still would have all made it back alive if Hamilton could have managed to follow orders, but damn replacements can never seem to do that. By not following orders Hamilton not only got himself killed, he succeeded in getting Langston killed as well. When the fighting concluded, Doc gathered each of their dog tags, handing them to Saunders, and the squad somberly headed back.

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As Hanley slammed down the phone, Saunders snapped back to the present and flipped the dog tags on Hanley's desk. Saunders waited for the inevitable and well deserved lashing he was about to receive. Saunders reflected on how the patrol should have been routine. *We should have been able to avoid contact. I should have been able to get everyone back safely!*

As Hanley looked down at the dog tags and then up at Saunders, he snapped, "What the hell happened? Can't you even follow one simple order?" He regretted his tone immediately, as he wasn't really mad at Saunders, but rather Captain Jampel and the orders he had just received. A request had come down from Company to escort some nitwit Lieutenant Taylor on some random, useless location surveying trip. It's one thing to send the men out on combat related patrols, but to send them out on an escort patrol so that some pencil pusher can validate his geographical data for textbooks? *TEXTBOOKS of all things! Doesn't Company understand that men can die just as easily on these escort patrols?*

Saunders glared at Hanley, but simply responded, "They were green."

Having released some of his frustration by yelling at Saunders, Hanley lit a cigarette and sighed, "They're getting younger and younger."

"And seem to be arriving with less and less basic training." Saunders added grimly.

Saunders finished giving Hanley his full report along with the Kraut placement information they had gathered, and turned to leave.

"There wasn't anything you could have done differently," Hanley offered noticing the distance in Saunders' eyes. Saunders shrugged without bothering to reply, walking away; but not with the typical Saunders saunter that Hanley was accustomed to seeing.

As he walked away, Saunders looked down and shoved his hands deep in his pockets. *I seem to be losing them faster and faster. I can't seem to save any of them. What's the point of me even being here?*

Saunders continued to walk over to the barn the squad was using as temporary quarters. As he neared, Saunders could hear the regular bickering of Kirby and Littlejohn with Doc playing peacemaker as usual. It was dark and the squad should have been settled down by now. He knew he should go in, see what this latest squabble was all about, and break it up. Feeling an ache all the way down to his bones, he was just weary of it all. *I'm not their babysitter! I'm not their chaplain. I can't be their father or brother and I don't want to be their friend.* He quickly turned and headed in the opposite direction looking for some solitude.



Saunders walked alone through the bombed out town. He mulled over just where he fit in these men's lives, and despondently concluded, *I'm the one that gets them killed.* Saunders finally found a quiet spot next to the river where he leaned up against a tree. As he slowly slid down the tree he threw off his helmet and dropped it and the Thompson on the ground. He rubbed his hands through his blond hair, gripping his head on both sides. Finally, Saunders pulled out and lit a Lucky. Leaning back against the tree with his elbows propped up on his knees, he took a long drag. As he finished the cigarette, Saunders leaned forward and buried his head in his arms. At some point, Saunders finally drifted off to sleep, still reciting, "I'm the one that gets them killed... I'm the one that gets them killed."

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Saunders woke, rubbed his eyes, and checked his watch seeing it was well past midnight. He gathered himself, picked up the Thompson and his helmet and headed back to the squad. As Saunders neared the burned out shop where Hanley was, he could hear loud voices and yelling, one of which he was sure was Hanley and the other was, *Kirby.*

As he turned the corner, there was Hanley, Kirby and Cajé engaged in a heated conversation. Not speaking above a whisper, he wondered, "What has Kirby gotten himself into now?"

"Saunders, I'm so glad you could join us! Where the hell have you been?"

Saunders pointed back towards the river while starting to respond to Hanley. As he presumed that was pointless, he redirected his attention toward Cajé. "Cajé, what happened?"

"Sarge, I didn't do anything," Kirby quickly interjected.

"Kirby, people don't just get beat up for no reason," Hanley mockingly pointed out.

"Sarge, he really didn't do anything this time." Cajé quickly jumped to Kirby's defense. "We were just walking back here when some civilians jumped us and started beating up Kirby."

Ignoring questions like "walking from where?" and "why were you out walking so late?" Saunders sarcastically cracked, "Kirby, whose sister, wife, girlfriend, or mother have you harassed now?"

"Honest, Sarge, I was just talking to her."

"With you, Kirby, that's all it takes."

Saunders put his hand on Kirby's chin, turning it toward it him, and tried to get a look at how bad the private had gotten himself beaten up this time. The damage didn't look too bad, a few cuts and some bruising was already starting to show. There was going to be at least one black eye, but nothing looked broken.

"You're just lucky Cajé was around. They didn't want to rough you up too bad in front of a witness."

Finally, having heard quite enough and none too pleased with Saunders' response to the situation, Hanley irately looked at Kirby and then back at Saunders. "Since Kirby doesn't seem to be up for taking on any more punishment at the moment," Hanley stared directly into Saunders eyes, making sure not to blink and continued "YOU, as his squad leader will have to do it for him."

"YES, SIR," Saunders snapped without showing the slightest hint of expression in his eyes as he matched Hanley's unblinking stare.

Kirby and Cajé both jumped slightly at the volume of Saunders' reply, and Kirby quickly began to protest.

"Look Lieutenant, I'm perfectly capable of doing whatever you are doling out as punishment. This isn't Sarge's fault."

Hanley held up his hand, signaling to Kirby that he had heard enough. "No, Kirby, as you said yourself. You did nothing wrong."

Hanley continued speaking to Kirby, but was watching Saunders' body language. "Saunders as your Squad Leader, was nowhere to be found. He should have been looking out for you."

Hanley turned all his attention to his sergeant, "Saunders, Lieutenant Taylor needs an escort for an all day recon patrol. And you just volunteered. Be ready at 0400."

"Lieutenant, Sarge has just done back-to-back two day patrols. Let me escort the lieutenant." Cajé objected.

"Saunders, you looking to get out of this volunteer assignment?" Hanley eyed Saunders, having heard no protests from his usually more vocal NCO.

Saunders shook his head while he continued to maintain his expressionless stare at Hanley. Still focused on Hanley, he quietly, but intently asked, "If that's all Lieutenant, I'd better get ready." Without waiting for a response, Saunders turned and walked away.



“Oh Saunders, see if you can manage to follow orders for Lieutenant TAYLOR!” Hanley yelled after him.

Saunders headed over to the barn. He entered and went directly to his pack to check for ammo and rations. The sergeant quickly gathered up necessary supplies and his gear and headed back outside. As he hurried out, he practically ran into Cajé and Kirby. Kirby started to say something to him, but Saunders quickly shot him a look that required no explanation. There was nothing he wanted to hear from either of them.

The night air was chilly, and it felt cool against Saunders’ face as he headed up the street to a pile of rubble that once was a structure of some kind. There was no way to discern what the pile of cement, rocks, and twisted metal once had been. Saunders sat on the edge of the pile to await 0400 and Lieutenant Taylor. He pulled out a Lucky and lighted it. *Is Hanley punishing me for Kirby, for Hamilton and Langston, for chastising myself, or all of the above?*

Saunders had finished his fourth cigarette when Corporal Wilson strolled up looking for him. “Hey Saunders, Lieutenant Taylor is looking for you. He’s ready to leave.”

Saunders gathered up his gear and headed further up the street to meet the lieutenant. He knew nothing about this Lieutenant Taylor, or what he would be in for during the day’s patrol. He sighed. *I guess it really doesn’t matter.* Under normal circumstances, Saunders would have at least gotten some background information from Hanley on the recon, the Lieutenant, what to expect, or something. But for now, things were anything but normal with Saunders.

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A worried Doc watched from a window in the barn across the street. He had witnessed the events of the past couple hours, the past few days for that matter, and was worried. *Something is off with the Sarge. I can’t seem to put a finger on it. But something is just not right!*

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As soon as Saunders met up with Lieutenant Taylor he immediately knew all he needed to know about the man. *Green with no field experience. I wonder if he’ll even recognize a Kraut.*

Lieutenant Taylor was not particularly young, but something about him gave the appearance of a college student about to do his thesis studies. Rather than holding the M1 as if he’d really be ready to use it, it was loosely hung over his shoulder, and he clutched a satchel and notebook with several pencils and pens in both hands.

As Saunders approached, the lieutenant inquired without actually looking at Saunders. “All right then, are you ready to move out? Do you have everything you need?”

“Yes Sir. Ready when you are.”

Saunders noted that the lieutenant didn’t really appear to hear or care about his answer.

Saunders hitched up the Thompson getting it into a comfortable position, tapped his helmet into place and jumped in step behind the already moving lieutenant.



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Hanley watched as Saunders obediently followed in line with Lieutenant Taylor. The NCO had never even asked their objectives, where they were going, or anything else. Like Doc, Hanley also began to worry. *Something is off with Saunders.* Saunders had not even argued when Hanley had taken his frustration with Kirby out on him or even earlier when Hanley had taken out his frustration with Captain Jampel regarding this stupid escort patrol. *It's just not like Saunders to let things go like this. To act as if nothing matters.*

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Lieutenant Taylor didn't like to talk much, which worked just fine for Saunders. They spent most of the day walking around with the lieutenant marking various things in his notebook, then moving on to another location. It was when they were about halfway back that they ran into a German patrol.

Saunders spotted the patrol and signaled Taylor to hit it. He held up his hand, indicating that there was a patrol of five Krauts just ahead of them. Saunders wasn't sure how much Taylor understood from his hand signals, so he crawled back to the lieutenant. They were in good cover, therefore the sergeant laid quietly as he assumed they would just let the patrol pass. But Lieutenant Taylor had other ideas.

"Saunders, I want you to rush directly at the Krauts. I'll come in from this side to cover you," he ordered, pointing to the right.

Saunders blinked in disbelief at first. *Did he just say what I thought he said ... go kill yourself and I'll cover you?* Under normal circumstances Saunders would have pointed out that this was suicide, and they should not engage the Germans. But instead, Saunders quietly whispered to himself, "what's the point?" as he fingered his Thompson and jumped to his feet.

The irrational move caught the young and inexperienced Kraut soldiers by total surprise. Saunders was able to take out three before they even fired a single shot. The fourth Kraut returned fire as Saunders was turning on him. The shot landed a glancing blow to Saunders' left arm just below the shoulder as his Thompson mowed the Kraut down. Surprisingly, Lieutenant Taylor was able to rush in and take out the fifth and final Kraut before he had a chance to take aim at Saunders' back. With a pleased look on his face, the lieutenant slapped Saunders on the back. "Great job sergeant! Now let's head for home."

Lieutenant Taylor was too busy gathering up his notebook and satchel to notice that Saunders had been hit, and Saunders made no mention of the wound to the lieutenant.

As they finally walked into town, Saunders had already begun to feel a significant amount of pain in his arm and was glad that the dark could hide the grimace on his face. As they neared the barn, Saunders slowed and turned to the lieutenant.

"Lieutenant, if you don't need me anymore, I'm going to clean up and grab something to eat."

Lieutenant Taylor, who had continued walking, not paying much attention to Saunders, distractedly responded. "Sure Saunders, I can give my report to Captain Jampel without you. Get some sleep." Without so much as a glance back he continued, "We'll be going out again at 0400."

Sullenly, Saunders realized there was no point in opposing the lieutenant and quietly murmured, "Yes, Sir."

Lieutenant Taylor headed over to Captain Jampel to give his report. When he arrived, Captain Jampel was already meeting with Hanley. They both looked up as the lieutenant approached.

"How'd it go Taylor? Any problems?"

"None at all, Captain."

Lieutenant Taylor briefed Captain Jampel on the terrain he and Saunders had covered, as well as what information he had deemed important and took note of. Having finished his report, Lieutenant Taylor glanced over to Lieutenant Hanley, "Hanley, I can see why you like Saunders so much. He never once questioned an order. And his attack of the Krauts was effortless."

"Krauts!" Hanley snapped.

In an even, yet undeniably angry tone, Captain Jampel inquired, "You failed to mention running into any Germans in your report, Lieutenant."

"Oh, sorry. Forgot to mention that minor skirmish. We ran into a Kraut patrol on the way back. I thought it was better to take them out rather than let them pass by." He didn't seem to notice the concerned look on the other two officer's faces as he added, "I didn't think we should let anyone know of our presence in the area."



"And Saunders. Didn't he suggest it was best to let them pass since there were only two of you?" Hanley quizzed, trying not to let the captain see the doubt in his eyes.

"Saunders didn't say a word. Just followed my orders and rushed the Germans."

Hanley quickly looked out the window as he realized they hadn't seen Saunders. "Is Saunders okay?"

"Of course. He's fine. I told him to get some rest before we go out again at 0400."

Lieutenant Taylor realized that he hadn't actually requested or received permission for Saunders' support again. "Assuming that's alright with you, Captain."

"Since," Captain Jampel hesitated then slowly nodded in approval. "It went so well." The captain promptly shot a look at Hanley that indicated he should get the real story from Saunders.

Having received Captain Jampel's approval to go out again with Saunders, Lieutenant Taylor departed. Hanley quickly followed and headed directly to the only person that could make sense of what had actually happened out on patrol. The closer he got to the barn, the larger the knot growing in the pit of his stomach got. *What the hell is going on with Saunders?*

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Saunders entered the barn, stumbling toward the bedroll already turned out on the floor. He smiled. *Doc*. The exhausted sergeant gave a cursory glance about to see if anyone was around as he fell onto the blankets. Satisfied that the barn was empty, he took off his jacket and examined his wound. Saunders had already noticed there was blood soaking through his jacket, so was not surprised by the amount of blood that had saturated his shirt. He ripped open the hole in his shirt to see that while there was plenty of blood, the bullet had only grazed his arm. With that, Saunders pulled out some sulfa and a bandage.

At that moment, Doc stepped out of the shadows where he had been watching Saunders.

"Hey Sarge, let me look at that."

"Doc!" Saunders snapped feeling a bit agitated at being caught off guard by the medic's sudden appearance, "it's nothing but a scratch. I just ran into a tree branch."

"Let me take a look," the medic repeated.

Not in the mood to tolerate the medic, Saunders barked, "Doc, leave me alone. I said it was nothing!" He immediately laid back on the bedroll and turned his back to the medic. Doc

accepted that this was a fight he would not win. He threw a blanket over the sergeant and walked out.

As Doc left the barn he ran into Hanley coming over to talk to Saunders.

"If you're looking to talk to Saunders, Lieutenant. He's already asleep." Doc figured Saunders probably wasn't in any more of a mood to talk to Hanley than he was to talk to him. "You'll just have to talk to him in the morning."

"He's going out again 0400."

"Do you think that's such a good idea, Lieutenant?"

"Not my call. Lieutenant Taylor requested him again." Hanley tried not to show his concern. "And Captain Jampel okayed it."



The two men looked at each other, neither liking the situation. They both had an uneasy feeling there was something more going on with Saunders, but neither knew exactly what it was or what to do about it.

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Saunders' internal clock woke him in plenty of time and he quietly sat up. The sergeant moved his arm around to loosen up the stiffness and realized that his bandage had slipped and the wound had dried to his shirt. *Should have let Doc bandage it up.* He felt the wound pull open, and a quick survey indicated it was bleeding again. Saunders grabbed another bandage, wrapped it around the wound, threw on his jacket, and got up to leave.

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From a dark corner across the room, Doc silently watched in concern. *Just a scratch. That tree branch must have been holding a Schmeisser.*

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About half way through the day, Lieutenant Taylor and Saunders reached an unmarked area on the map. Saunders surveyed the open field in front of them, which was basically one big mud puddle. It was about 300 square yards with a rocky hillside on the left and a thick forest area on the right. The sixth sense that Saunders carried around with him at all times was screaming. *This is a great place for an ambush.* The lieutenant indicated that they would cross directly through the mud. Saunders knew better, but elected not to point out the obvious. *Going through the middle of this mud puddle is one stupid suicidal move.*

As they reached the middle, where the mud was the wettest and deepest all hell broke loose. Gunfire erupted from the rocks on their left as well as the trees on their right. Saunders dropped face first into the mud, sinking down below ground level. He practically had to swim through the mud to get back to the lieutenant. Lieutenant Taylor had already turned around and was pulling back out of the mud.

As they scrambled back through the mud, the bullets continued to skip around and over them but neither were hit. Saunders surmised that the German's had started their attack too quickly, allowing them the ability to retreat. As they were almost free of the mud, Saunders lifted his head just in time to see a grenade flying through the air. Just before the grenade hit the ground he grabbed the back of Lieutenant Taylor's jacket, yanking him to his feet. Almost

simultaneously with the grenade explosion, Saunders tackled the lieutenant behind the cover of a fallen tree. The weight of the grenade caused it to sink deep into the mud, providing a cushion that dampened the affects of the explosion.

Saunders instantly lunged for his Thompson that had fallen a few feet from where he had hurtled the tree log. Still slipping in the mud, he hurried for stable footing to survey their situation. Much to Saunders surprise he found no sign of any Germans closing in on them.

Saunders held back the urge to laugh at the mud-caked officer. "Lieutenant, you ok?"

Lieutenant Taylor gathered himself and checked to see if everything felt in place. He then quickly made sure he still had his notebook and satchel. "Fine. What about you, Saunders?"

"I'm fine, Sir." Saunders smiled as he looked at his own mud-covered body. He continued to survey the area around them. Still not truly believing that they had gotten out of the mess alive. "We should probably get moving. I'm not sure how long it's going to be safe to hang around here."

With a bit of a quiver in his voice, the lieutenant motioned forward, "Alright. Let's call it a day. We can get cleaned up and go back out again tomorrow."

Saunders cracked a grin, how could he be so lucky. *I get to do this again tomorrow.* As he pushed back his helmet slightly, he felt something wet and sticky on his fingers. Saunders brought his hand down to see that mixed with the black of the mud was a deep red liquid. *Just great. What am I gonna tell Doc this time?*

As they walked back, more blood continued to run into Saunders' eyes. He tried to wipe it away, but there was nothing that wasn't caked with mud to wipe it away with. Finally he gave up, admitting that it was a losing battle. He was unable to determine how bad of a wound it actually was. *It couldn't be too bad. The Lieutenant hasn't noticed that my head is bleeding. I don't have a headache. My vision is fine, and I'm not having trouble walking. Must just be a scratch.*

When they got back, Lieutenant Taylor went to debrief Captain Jampel and Saunders headed off to find somewhere to clean up.

As Lieutenant Taylor finished his report to Captain Jampel, he again asked for Saunders' support for one more day. Captain Jampel gave Taylor the okay and sent for Hanley. As Hanley arrived, he saw the muddy lieutenant leaving. Hanley smiled as he wondered if Saunders had finally snapped and shoved him in a mud puddle somewhere.

"Everything ok, Taylor?"

"Just great. Going out again tomorrow."

"With Saunders?"

"The captain just gave the okay."

Absentmindedly, brushing mud off the front of his uniform and continuing on his way, he added, "Saunders is a pleasure to command."

"That's it. Saunders is a lot of things, but a pleasure to command?" Hanley muttered as he continued on to speak with Captain Jampel. "Captain, Saunders has been out six days in a row now."

"Hanley, you know he's done worse."

"Yea, sure I know that." He did not even attempted to hide his concern, "But you've heard what Taylor's been saying about Saunders. Never questions an order. Pleasure to command." Hanley's voice expressed the urgency he felt, "Captain, you know that isn't the Saunders we know."

Captain Jampel sat for a moment. He understood what Hanley was saying and agreed with his concerns. But Lieutenant Taylor was a pain in his ass and Saunders was a good



soldier. While he agreed Saunders seemed to be acting a bit off, no harm had come of it. If one more day with Saunders made Lieutenant Taylor go away, it didn't seem like much of a risk.

"It's just one more day, Hanley. Then things can get back to normal."

"Yea. Normal," Hanley wondered what that really meant with Saunders these days.

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Saunders headed off to wash up and find a clean uniform. While showering, he realized something. *For all the craziness of the last two days, it's actually been nice. No responsibilities for keeping someone else alive.* If the lieutenant died it would be his own damn fault, and that left Saunders only responsible for himself. The freedom had been nice. There were no worries about making the right decisions. None of the squad had been dependent on him for their lives in the last couple of days.

Hanley's right, I can't seem to control the men on patrol or off. Not Kirby, not Hamilton, not Langston, not Klaussen. What's the point of me being a squad leader?

Saunders finished cleaning the mud off and he noticed how much blood was still flowing from his head. *Stupid head wounds, they seem to bleed forever.* He could see that his arm had not fared much better from the events of the day. The arm wound still seemed to be bleeding as well. Saunders slapped a bandage on both his head and arm, put on the clean uniform he had scrounged up, and headed off to the barn to get some sleep.

When he sat down on his bedroll, Saunders became painfully aware of the fact that he had a pretty bad headache. The grumble in his stomach made him realize that he hadn't eaten. *How long has it been?* He started to rummage around for some rations when a hand reached out in front of him, handing him something to eat.

He did not even look up. "Thanks, Doc. Didn't realize how hungry I was."

"Sarge, aren't you pushing yourself a bit too hard?" responded the soft southern voice. "When is the last time you ate?"

"No, I'm not. Yesterday, sometime." Saunders wasn't really sure when he last ate, but no sense in telling Doc that.

"I see you have a new scratch today. Another tree?" Doc asked, with a knowing smile.

"Yea, Doc, just another scratch."

Seeing the concern in the medic's eyes, Saunders followed up with "I'm ok, Doc, really." He hoped that he sounded more convincing than he felt. With that, the exhausted sergeant laid back and fell asleep; still holding the unopened rations.

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As Saunders fell asleep, Doc once again covered him with a blanket. He left the sleeping sergeant and headed directly to Lieutenant Hanley.

Seeing the medic's determined stride, Hanley knew exactly what was on his mind.

"Well, spill it, Doc."

"Lieutenant, I want to talk to you about the Sarge."



“Sure Doc, let me guess. You don’t think Saunders should be going out again tomorrow.”

“He’s going out again!? You’ve got to be kidding, Lieutenant.” The medic wasn’t even trying to hide his anger.

Hanley looked at the medic, trying to let him know how much he understood, how much he was feeling the same thing. “Just one more time, Doc”

“Let’s hope it’s not the LAST time, Lieutenant.” The medic angrily responded as he stomped away.

“Let’s hope it’s not the last time.” Hanley worriedly repeated.

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Saunders woke with a sense of impending doom and the name of Jessie Klaussen on his mind. *Well Jessie, today should be strike three.* He was sure the last two days had been strikes one and two. Today was sure to be strike three you’re out. *Out of the business of being responsible for keeping men alive. Out of babysitting them during their off time. Out of this hellish war. Out of life.*

Saunders gazed into the darkness as he despondently thought how Jessie Klaussen would be satisfied with the day’s anticipated outcome. “You’re going to get your wish today, Jessie Klaussen. You’re going to get your wish.” Saunders calmly put on his jacket, grabbing his gear. *Then there will be no more Jessie Klaussens out there wishing me dead.*

For the third morning in a row, Lieutenant Taylor and the sergeant started out on their recon patrol. Late in the afternoon, Saunders heard the click of a machine gun. They had come up on a German machine gun placement. *Well Jessie, here’s strike three.*

Saunders reacted immediately. He was in motion before the Krauts even realized the Americans were there. He slung his Thompson over his shoulder, grabbed a grenade in both hands, and ran at full speed directly toward the machine gun nest. As Saunders neared the machine gun, he flipped out the grenade pins and lobbed the first grenade, hitting its mark dead center. Before the first grenade detonated, he had already lobbed the second; again hitting the mark. Body parts were thrown in the air, landing in various directions as the grenades landed in the middle of the German soldiers.



As Saunders had charged the machine gun, one Kraut soldier spotted the American sergeant running at them and let loose a volley with his Schmeisser. Simultaneous to the exploding grenades, the Schmeisser successfully made contact; ripping through Saunders’ leg. With the concussion of the grenades, as the bullets ripped into his leg, Saunders was thrown backward into a gully beneath the tree line to the right of the machine gun nest.

As the smoke settled, Lieutenant Taylor stood bewildered as to what had just occurred. He had not even seen the machine gun placement. One minute Saunders had been walking right next to him the next minute he was on a full sprint. There was firing and explosions or was it explosions and firing. Then nothing but silence. There were no cries of wounded, only a dead eerie silence.

As the lieutenant moved forward, he could see there were several dead German soldiers and body parts near and around the machine gun nest. As he stepped closer he was stunned to find Saunders’ camouflaged helmet in the pile of bodies. Gagging and retching, Lieutenant Taylor grabbed Saunders’ helmet and ran stumbling from the horrific scene.

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Several hours later, Kirby was the first to see Lieutenant Taylor arrive carrying Saunders' helmet. He yelled for Cajé and Doc, who came running, along with Littlejohn and Billy. They all watched with dismay as the lieutenant walked past them and directly toward the old dress shop where Captain Jampel was.

Kirby immediately started to follow, but was grabbed by Cajé.

"Kirby! Just wait."

"Whaddaya mean wait? You saw what he was carrying, Cajé. You saw that Sarge didn't come back with him." Cajé put Kirby in a bear hug to keep him from pulling free.

Doc stepped in front of Kirby. "Lieutenant Hanley will come talk to us."

Kirby continued to try and free himself from Cajé, frantic to strike out at someone.

"Shouldn't we go tell Lieutenant Hanley? He might not even know that the lieutenant is back." Billy questioned.

With that Kirby relaxed in Cajé's grip as they all looked at each other. None of them sure they wanted to be the one to tell Hanley. Resigning himself as the most logical choice, Doc spoke up. "I'll go tell the lieutenant."

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By the time Lieutenant Taylor finished telling Captain Jampel about the events of the patrol, Hanley and Doc arrived at the dress shop. Captain Jampel asked Lieutenant Taylor to repeat the details of Saunders' death for Hanley. Lieutenant Taylor obliged as he handed Saunders' helmet to Doc. The medic observed the amount of blood inside Saunders' camouflaged helmet.

Speaking to no one in particular while still looking down at Saunders' helmet, Doc declared, "He already had a head wound before you left this morning."

"What?" Lieutenant Taylor countered.

"This blood could be from the head wound he got yesterday."

"What head wound are you talking about? Saunders had no wounds."

The usually soft spoken southern drawl vanished from Doc's voice. "He MOST certainly did. He had a wound in his left arm from your first day out. A bullet wound would be my guess though the Sarge wouldn't let me look at it." As the medic continued, he directed his anger more at Captain Jampel. "Then he had a head wound from yesterday. It didn't look very bad from what I could see. But it WAS bleeding pretty good."

"Doc, why didn't you say Saunders was hurt?" Hanley snapped, angrier at himself than the medic.

"He wouldn't let me look at them. You know Saunders as well as I do. He told me they were scratches. Said he was ok." With a more accusing tone in his voice, the medic's lecture continued, "I TOLD you I was concerned." He fought to keep his anger under control in front of the officers. "You told me it was just one more day."



With that, Hanley turned away from the medic and stood face to face with Lieutenant Taylor for what seemed like an eternity to Doc. "So you didn't actually find his body."

“Well no.” Somewhat surprised by the question, Lieutenant Taylor followed up with, “But there is no way he survived.”

But Saunders isn't just anybody. Doc waited to see what Hanley would do next.

“Can you confirm on the map, EXACTLY where this occurred.”

“Sure, Hanley.” Grabbing the map Lieutenant Taylor marked the location very precisely, along with the path he and Saunders took getting there, and the path he took coming back alone.

“If that's all, Captain. I've finished my business here and I'd like to get packed and back to HQ.”

It took every ounce of restraint that Hanley had not to deck him. *If that's all! Do you mean if killing Saunders is enough can I leave now?*

As Captain Jampel dismissed Lieutenant Taylor, waiting until the lieutenant was gone, he slowly turned back to Hanley and Doc. He put up his right hand, signaling them to stop. “I know what you're going to ask before you even say it.”

“Well Captain, he didn't actually see Saunders' body.” Hanley quickly continued, “And he didn't even notice that Saunders had been wounded twice. So what makes you think he knows whether or not Saunders is really dead?”

Without hesitation, the captain nodded. “Take Saunders' squad.”

By the time Hanley and Doc got back to the squad, Kirby and Cajé were getting ready to head out on their own to look for Saunders. This did not go unnoticed by Hanley as he entered the room.



“Going somewhere, soldiers?”

“We're going to look for Sarge,” replied Kirby without hesitation. Looking at Hanley's face, he sheepishly followed with, “you can court martial me after we find him.”

“That won't be necessary, Kirby. We're all going to look for Saunders.”

Everyone immediately jumped up and started gathering their gear.

“Wait, wait, wait. We can't leave until it gets closer to daylight.”

“We'll leave at 0400 then.” Kirby instructed.

“Is that an order, General Kirby?”

“Ah, that was a question, Lieutenant, Sir.”

“Yes, we'll leave at 0400.” Hanley said with the slightest of smiles. He was also anxious to head out and find Saunders as soon as possible.

Before leaving, Hanley stopped and turned around. “Does anyone know what's been going on with Saunders? Is his attitude been just about Hamilton and Langston's deaths?”

“He's been pretty quiet ever since he came back from patrol with O'Neill's squad. Maybe something happened on that patrol?” Littlejohn cautiously answered, knowing that Saunders would hate them discussing his behavior.

“There was nothing unusual in his report. But Sergeant O'Neill is still over at the aid station. I'll see if he heard anything.” With that, Hanley headed over to have a word with the sergeant.

*** *** ***

Sergeant O'Neill was sitting up, smoking a cigarette as Hanley walked in and sat beside his cot.

“Hey Lieutenant, what's up?”

"I wanted to talk to you about Saunders."

"I heard something about him being missing. Are you looking for volunteers to go out looking for him?" Sergeant O'Neill was already throwing back his covers and swinging his legs off the cot.

"Whoa, hold on there. I just wanted to talk to you about the patrol he went on with your squad." Hanley hesitated, knowing that there would be a code of silence he would need to break. "Did you hear about anything happening that didn't make the official report?"

"What are you digging for, Lieutenant?"

"Saunders has been off. I'm trying to figure out what's up with him. And I thought maybe something happened on that patrol."

Sergeant O'Neill gave Hanley a knowing look. "No, nothing happened on the patrol. But I DO know what's eating Saunders."

Hanley could see the sergeant was hesitant to continue. "Sergeant, it's important enough for me to ask. So it's important enough for you to tell me what it is."

"Sure, Lieutenant. Saunders came by to see me before he took my squad out on patrol. He was just asking about the men. Was there anything he should know. You know, that kind of stuff."

Hanley gave the sergeant a stern "get to the point" look, knowing how O'Neill could make a short story long with the best of them.

"Then out of the blue, he asks. Do I ever wonder what was the point of everything we lived with? I wasn't sure what he meant." He looked at the lieutenant to make sure this was indeed the information he was looking for. "I really had to pull it out of him."

Hanley knowingly nodded his head and indicated for Sergeant O'Neill to keep going.

"I finally got him to spill what was on his mind. I guess he got a letter from Jessie Klaussen."

Hanley looked questioningly at the sergeant.

"Jimmy Klaussen's older sister." Sergeant O'Neill hesitated, knowing how much Saunders would hate him talking about the rest, but continued. "The gist of the letter was that it accused Saunders of murdering her baby brother. She said that Saunders was more concerned with being a big hero and getting medals at the cost of his men's lives."

It was all becoming clear to Hanley now. This was the exactly the kind of thing that would get under Saunders' skin and fester.

Sergeant O'Neill finished, "And she hoped Saunders got what he deserved. Hoped he died soon before he killed anyone else's brother."

Hanley closed his eyes trying to remember Saunders' report on Jimmy Klaussen's death. "If I remember correctly. Klaussen was killed when the squad was pinned down by a machine gun. Caje and Kirby both ended up wounded. Saunders just about killed himself trying to save them all."

"That just about sums it up, Lieutenant. Saunders got himself all shot up while taking out the machine gun." Sergeant O'Neill remembered how worried the lieutenant had been that Saunders wasn't going to make it.

"You know, I tried to get him to let it go. Told him it was just a family member trying to make sense of the war. Just needed someone to blame."

"But of course Saunders couldn't let it go." Hanley stood, threw a pack of cigarettes to Sergeant O'Neill. "Thanks O'Neill, you've filled in the blanks."

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As Saunders opened his eyes, his world was dark and cold. *I know I must be alive, because I hurt way too much to be dead.* Very slowly he began to take inventory of his aches and pains. His body was sore all over as if he had been run over by something. *Not run over by something - thrown through the air.* He felt along his body for broken bones, but nothing was broken.

Saunders reached up and touched his head. There were a couple of new bumps on the back of his head and there was bleeding in the front coming from a bandaged wound. Next he went down both arms and felt the moisture on the left shoulder of his jacket. He reached inside and fingered the hole in his shirt and the blood soaked bandage. *I haven't bled to death from this yet. Not likely that I'm going to.*

Then Saunders looked down and could see the amount of blood he was losing from his leg. As his senses became more and more conscious, Saunders became aware that he was in trouble with the amount of blood gushing from his leg wounds. A quick survey of the leg indicated three entrance and three exit wounds. *Well I guess that's good news.* Saunders quickly removed his belt and put it around the leg as a tourniquet. He grabbed some sulfa and sprinkled it over as much of the wounds as he could. Pulling out bandages, Saunders wrapped as many of the wounds as he could. "That's going to have to do for now."

With his medical needs taken care of as best he could, Saunders looked around to see how he might get himself out of his current predicament. He tried to remember what had happened. There was a machine gun. Jessie Klaussen was killed. *No, that's not right.* Jimmy Klaussen was killed, Jessie sent the letter. Saunders remembered the letter from Jessie and how she had called him a murderer. Saunders dismally slumped down, no longer interested in getting out of his situation.

The sergeant then remembered Lieutenant Taylor. *Where was Lieutenant Taylor?* Now Saunders was alert again. He recalled being out on patrol with Lieutenant Taylor, the professor. Saunders remembered the machine gun, throwing the grenades, and taking a hit in the leg. He listened intently, but couldn't hear anything. *Either they were all dead or gone.*

But where was Lieutenant Taylor? No one would have any idea where they were, no one would be coming to help. If they were going to get out of this, Saunders was going to have to save them. Lieutenant Taylor would be depending on him to save his life.

Then there was Jessie Klaussen again, telling him he murdered Lieutenant Taylor, Jimmy, Hamilton, Langston, Kirby, Cajé, Littlejohn, Billy, Hanley. *I've killed so many. I've let so many families down.* He sagged down, with his hands on his head, trying to make it all go away.

What is the point of trying to save yourself, they execute murderers don't they? Jessie, Jimmy, Hamilton, Langston, Lieutenant Taylor. Finally, thankfully, Saunders lost consciousness.



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Well before the slightest hint of daybreak crept into the sky, Hanley and the squad had moved out. Cajé was on point and was keeping a brutal pace. Under ordinary circumstances, everyone would have expected to hear complaints from Kirby, but these were not ordinary circumstances and there were no complaints to be heard.

All stops were kept to a minimum. Doc wasn't sure he had seen any of them move this fast for such a prolonged amount of time. If they did find Saunders alive, he hoped they would have the strength to carry him back. *When they found Saunders alive, when they found Saunders alive*, he corrected himself.

As they neared the location of the machine gun placement that Lieutenant Taylor had pointed out on the map, the tension began to grow. The angst showed on everyone's face; fear, concern, hope, apprehension all wrapped into one.

Without advanced warning, they were there. Slowly and deliberately they walked to the machine gun nest and looked at the carnage. No one could look away as they sorted through the bodies. As they finished the gruesome task, each man sighed with relief, there was no American uniform anywhere in the pile.

Without speaking, each of them began to fan out in different directions. Cajé found Saunders' Thompson and slung the weapon over his shoulder. Littlejohn spotted blood near the gully and called Doc over. Doc immediately looked to Hanley, worried at the amount of blood. No words were spoken; the worried looks were enough to say it all.

Finally there was a frantic shout from Kirby "Doc, I've found him. Get over here quick."

Doc slid down into the gully where Saunders was lying and immediately checked for a pulse. "He's alive." Then the medic saw the leg wounds. Seeing Saunders' belt, he knew that the sergeant had been conscious long enough to try and save his own life. "Now it's our turn to do the rest, Sarge."

Hanley knelt next to the medic, hesitating. "Doc, how bad is it?"

"It's bad, Lieutenant. We need to get him back right away."

"Littlejohn, Billy get something to make a litter with!" Hanley barked. The order was not necessary as they were already well on their way making the litter.

Once the litter was finished, Saunders was put on it and lifted. If Doc thought the pace coming was quick, he had seen nothing compared to the pace on the return trip. He swore that Cajé actually ran the entire trip. The only stops made were when Doc needed to check Saunders and the litter bearers were swapped.

As soon as they got to the aid station, Saunders was immediately rushed into surgery. As the hours passed, the squad alternated sitting and standing in front of the aid station awaiting word. Both Doc and Hanley were allowed in and continued to check on Saunders' status. As time passed, members of Sergeant O'Neill's squad also joined in the wait. O'Neill smiled. *Believe it or not Saunders, you do matter.*

As word was received that Saunders was out of surgery and was going to make it, they all sighed with relief. There were handshakes and back slaps, and then most of the soldiers headed out to the mess tent. All left but the chosen ones: Cajé, Kirby, Littlejohn, Billy, and Doc. They waited until they could see with their own eyes that their babysitter, chaplain, father, brother, and friend was going to be back with them as soon as possible.

*** *** ***

When Saunders finally regained consciousness he found Hanley sitting at his side. "You gave us quite a scare."



Looking up and seeing Doc there as well, Saunders smiled and said with a raspy voice, "Just a scratch."

"Yea, just a scratch, Sarge."

Hanley gave a look to the medic indicating that he wanted to speak with Saunders alone. "Hey, I'll let the guys know you're awake. I'm sure they'll be by to see you soon."

Saunders didn't miss the fact that Hanley had dismissed the medic. "What's wrong? Did I kill Lieutenant Taylor?"

"Lieutenant Taylor? No. He's fine. He headed back to HQ right after he told us you were dead." Hanley deadpanned in his smooth baritone voice.

Saunders raised an eyebrow. "Hope you aren't disappointed."

Hanley laughed and then took a more serious tone. "Saunders, I received a letter from Jessie Klaussen."

The twinge Saunders felt in his heart was instant. He wasn't even sure how to respond.

Hanley could see the anguish on Saunders' face. "I think you should just let me read you the letter."

"Lieutenant, that won't be necessary. I received my own letter."

"Yes, I know. But I'd like you to hear mine."

Hanley pulled the letter out of his shirt pocket. As the lieutenant began to read, Saunders tried to close himself off from the world.



"Lieutenant Hanley

My name is Jessie and I am Jimmy Klaussen's older sister. I'm writing you to ask your assistance in giving my deepest apology to one of your sergeants. A Sergeant Saunders. I have wrongly accused him of murdering my brother Jimmy and am not sure how to take back the horrible things that I have written to him.

You see, when Jimmy joined Sergeant Saunders' squad he could not stop talking about what a hero Saunders was and how he had fought in Africa, Italy and had been in France since D-Day. That Saunders must have bunches and bunches of medals, because he was such a good soldier.

So when Jimmy died, I was sure it was because Sergeant Saunders was off doing something that would get him more medals and make him a bigger hero. I wished Saunders dead before he could cause any other soldiers to die or sisters the heartache of losing their baby brothers.

After I wrote Sergeant Saunders, we received a final letter from Jimmy. In this letter, Jimmy talked about how Saunders would do anything to save the lives of his men. Jimmy had seen Sergeant Saunders wounded while trying in vain to save other soldiers, with no glory for himself. When this war ended there would be a lot of GIs alive because of Saunders. Whether Sergeant Saunders liked it or not he really was their protector and was there to keep them alive.

We never knew our father and Jimmy looked up to Sergeant Saunders as both the father we never had and the big brother I couldn't be. Jimmy actually went as far as to say that if anything were to ever happen to him, that we should know that Sergeant Saunders probably did everything humanly possible and more to try and save his life.

Please let me know that Sergeant Saunders is alright and please tell him that I truly hope my words of anger have not caused him any pain or hurt his ability to save the lives of other GIs like Jimmy.

It gives me and my mother peace to know that someone was looking out for Jimmy and we hope to meet Sergeant Saunders when this war ends.

Sincerely, Jessie Klaussen”

As Hanley finished reading the letter, he said nothing. The lieutenant just patted Saunders on the shoulder and placed the letter in his hands.

Saunders closed his eyes and whispered “I guess there is a point.”

His moment of peace was interrupted by the whoops and hollers of HIS squad arriving to see for their own eyes that their sergeant, their father, their brother, their friend was going to make it.

The End