

## **A World at War**

The air around me is heavy with moisture and darkness, each fighting a battle to be the most suffocating element. I close my eyes and I focus my mind on the gentle rustle of the waves passing over each other as they rush to the sandy safety of the beach. I let the grass around me brush against my bare flesh, pretending it is my little girl tracing her fingers along my cheekbones. All these distractions calm me. They claw my mind away from the terrible truth of what I will be doing in a few minutes time. I squint against the night, straining to see the boats of the Allied Invasion cresting over the silent horizon. My objective is clear to me. All the steps drilled into my brain until it just seemed like a childish game that I might've played in my boyhood. I have no doubt that I won't fulfil it. However, despite the painful simplicity of it all, I cannot help but wonder about all the men with cherished families of wives, children, siblings and parents who will soon be harshly ripped from their lives forever. The families will never see the body of their husband, father, brother or son again. All they will have left of them and to mourn over will be a telegram saying, "Officer Russo-killed in action".

The first wave of boats crash against the shore. Gangplanks are thrown out, marking a clear pathway onto the beach. Soon soldiers are pouring out of the boats and down the gangplanks, reminding me much of the rush of the waves. They have the same determination and resolve. We hold fire. Not in hesitation, but in anticipation. Quickly, the first mines are set off, throwing tens of men in all directions. They land limply, no longer anything more other than ragdolls. Before long, explosions assault my ears in every direction. I can't help but cringe. This isn't war. This is carnage.

The first stragglers of soldiers make it through the maze of mines to be confronted with razor sharp barbed wire. They're now in firing range. I turn to my squadron, all rigidly posed, prepared for the signal to fire. Their eyes are trained through the sites on their guns, victims already chosen. I wonder how many of them comprehend just how much that one lead bullet will change so many lives. It's time for me to give the order. It's time for me to authorise the murder of dozens of helpless men. It's time for the said men to fade from existence, what lay ahead of them in the future never to be discovered, what past stories lived soon to be forgotten. "Schießen! Fire!" Bangs erupt around me. The soldiers crumble to the ground, only empty shells now. The men collapse lifelessly and I realise just what their value is to anyone here now. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

This is pure massacre. Surely, this must be wrong for it cannot be right! The number of men dying should never be able to justify a cause. Never.

One silver lining, if you can call it that, to this battle- it was quick. It took no more than three hours to wipe out thousands of soldiers. A few of ours were killed, a hundred or so wounded. However our dead and wounded can at least return to their families. The Allies' men that litter our shoreline, dead or barely alive, will be burnt to dust. No ceremony. No mercy. No humanness. But what can I expect? This is war. They are our enemies. They deserve no less than what they get. But to me, all I see is what might've happened to me if I was born British or American and not German. All I see is everything I could've lost today.

I board one of the first trucks, a murky camouflage beast that coughs out black exhaust at every hill, back to base. As a Sergeant I have the 'privilege' of reporting the actions of today to the Commanding Officer of our sector. To be honest, I do feel privileged over my men today. They, as mere soldiers, are left to clear away the 'wreckage'. I pity them. The thought of all those mutilated bodies being piled together makes me want to throw up. I must stop thinking about it. I will not be looked upon well if Head Quarters see their chosen Sergeant throwing up all over the place after a battle. I cannot face a demotion. As a

Sergeant I have a weekend leave every month to visit my family. Any rank lower and the chance will be slim. After today, the urge to hold my wife and daughter in my arms is almost overpowering. I must cherish what I have. I will try to focus on that as my lesson today and not on how many lives I have shredded to pieces...

"Reports are that you have done exceptionally well today, Sergeant Richter. Congratulations. You will be well rewarded for your work. A reward that I feel is well justified with your progress". I am in the comfortably furnished office of Commanding Officer Klein. In the corner, a fire blazes warming the snug room. In the other corner there is a door. A door which leads to the 'interrogation' room. The room that also conveniently has the torture weapons stored. I try to suppress a violent shudder and turn my gaze back to the Officer. I bow my head in acknowledgement and gratitude of the man eighteen years my senior. He nods curtly, dismissing me. I 'Heil Hitler' him, but he is too absorbed in the criticizing of some paperwork. I then turn to go. As I reach the door of his polished oak office he continues:

"Indeed. Many reports said you were quite chivalrous and brave. Also quite merciless with those wet sissys". He laughs at this. I cringe inwardly. A true stab to my morality.

"Yes. Many said you were quite the erm... what was the word they used? Ah! Yes! A hero. Quite the hero today".

At this remark he looks up from his papers to study my reaction to this bewildering statement. My face was an emotionless mask; or at least I hope it was. I bowed my head once again. He seemed satisfied with this reaction and carried on his examination of the paperwork. I opened the heavy wooden door and exited the burgundy carpeted room with the overpowering stench of scotch and cigars.

Once outside and comfortably nestled upon a pile of supply boxes containing food, medical supplies and other such objects, I lit a cigarette and inhaled slowly, grateful for its instant calming effect. The sky was a thunderous grey, the temperature low enough so that my breath alone formed clouds of smoke; without the help of my cigarette. I pondered over the words of the Officer. A hero. Is that what I am for slaughtering hundreds of men? Ripping them away from so many of their dearly loved ones? Am I really a hero for that? If so, dear God help us. If I'm what a hero is, I pity the human race. I pity what we are. I pity what we've become. Dear God help us all, for if I'm a hero we are all damned to Hell.

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