

Freckles in the face of war

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An enemy ambush had separated me from my battalion and I was alone in the field. Crouching in the tall grass, I took a long pull from my canteen and wiped my lips. The noon sun was beating down and I would have to handle my water carefully. I squeezed some dirt and smeared it on my face for camouflage.

A big, orange monarch opened and closed its wings only a foot away. Running to my position, I'd flown past blackberry bushes that had ripped my pants. My goal was to reach the ocean where, hopefully, I would find a landing craft to get me the hell out of here.

I checked my compass and looked up at the sky. In a house at the edge of the field, a woman was hanging laundry on a clothes line. A cherry tree in the yard had lost most of its pink blossoms. There was a small shed in the yard and a sandbox. I squinted back into the field, scanning the tall grass for any movement that might signal the enemy.

I pondered when to make my move.

The woman hanging clothes looked out across the field and I lowered myself. There was no telling whose side she was on. One couldn't be too careful in these parts.

A funny sound came from a stand of trees and I flattened myself to the ground. Footsteps, many footsteps. I unholstered my .45 and lay still as a corpse. They passed by, without seeing me, not more than 10 feet away.

When I raised myself again to look around, a girl in a red blouse was standing in the yard next to the one where the lady had been hanging clothes. She waved to me. I signaled her to stay quiet and as she retreated into her house I lowered myself back into the grass.

I reached down and touched my leg where the blackberry bush had ripped my pants. When I brought my hand up there was some blood on it. This was not good. The enemy had dogs and the smell of blood would only make me more easily discovered. I fingered the leather handle of my trench knife. I would have to kill the dog first, quickly, with the knife in its throat and then shoot the handler with my .45. That would be loud and, I hoped, unnecessary.

The thing to do now was inch forward on my belly. Slow work, but I would remain invisible as well as be able to spot any mine trip wires.

Suddenly a plane came in low and strafed the field. I drew my helmet down over my head and gritted my teeth as the ground around me jumped up like popcorn, then it was gone. The butterfly opened its wings again on the blade of grass and I took another pull from my canteen and wiped my lips. The water, what was left of it, was warm but I was grateful for it.

From my breast pocket, I withdrew a letter from my wife, Pamela. She said all was well at home and that everyone prayed for me all the time. God, my leg hurt from the blackberry bushes. It was possible a thorn was embedded.

I was susceptible to such things, having had blood poisoning twice from thorns.

I missed Pamela. I missed our walks in the neighborhood and I missed riding our bikes together. If I ever got out of this hellhole alive, I'd tell her every day how much I loved her paintings. She'd painted the side of our Pontiac station wagon: flames streaming down the sides from the front wheels.

Now, she was in our house in Newport, probably having lunch. A sandwich. Probably turkey and cheese, her favorite. God, I was getting hungry! And my leg hurt. What if I did have blood poisoning again? And stuck in this hellhole!

Back home, my team might have a baseball game tonight. I played in the Sunset League, an adult league. We played down at Cardines

Field just off the bay. Pamela came to all of my games. She brought snacks. After the game, we'd sit in the stands eating celery and peanut butter. She had freckles. God, I loved her freckles. She didn't like her freckles.

I was probably going to have to make a break for it. Between the blood poisoning in my leg and my hunger, I had to get out of this hellhole!

Slowly, I rose to my knees. I adjusted my helmet strap, checked everything hanging off my equipment belt and made a run for it. I zigzagged through the high grass to make myself a harder target, was almost there when I was hit by machine gun fire. I dove down, knowing I'd have to crawl the rest of the way if I had any hope of making it alive.

But as I dove into the grass, a stiff piece hit me in the eye.

"Raaah!"

I dropped my rifle and ran toward the backyard. My mother came running out and immediately saw the stalk of grass sticking out of my eye. She threw me in the station wagon and we drove straight to Dr. Grimes's house, where he'd just sat down for Sunday lunch with his wife and 12 kids.

He brought me into his office at the front of the house and removed the stalk. I was going to live. I was going to be fine. He put a pirate's patch over my eye.

At home, my mother made me take a bath and then daubed Merthiolate on my scratched leg and put me to bed. She ferried up a grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup.

Pamela, who'd heard me screaming earlier, came over and sat on my bed. She brought her sketch pad and drew while I thumbed through a Mad magazine. I thought about how pretty she looked in her red blouse. Suddenly, she crawled up and kissed me on the cheek.

"I don't want you playing war anymore," she said. "I don't want to lose you."

I sighed. After a rough start, it had become a perfect summer's day.

