



SOLDIER

D O N W U L F F S O N

Mules

The next thing I knew, I was being nudged awake. It was still dark out. I strained to see the dial of my school watch. It was a little after four A.M.

Shivering in the early-morning cold, we ate hard biscuits and drank tepid ersatz coffee. Dobelmann called the platoon together. We joined in a loose circle around him, looking like a congregation of new converts kneeling with their minister.

Battalion headquarters at Tarnapol was still some eighteen kilometers away, he told us. We would be lugging in supplies to headquarters, basically coming in the back way. En route, we would pass through the ruins of the town of Vinnitsa. Under relentless artillery bombardment, our troops were holding the town to keep the road open—and thus our supply line to battalion headquarters.

"It is essential," said Dobelmann, "that you and the supplies get through." He looked around at us. "Any questions?"

None were asked.

Mules

Each of us was given roughly twenty-two kilograms to stow in our packs—mostly wax-wrapped, five-cartridge packages of ammunition. Combined with the rest of our gear, all told, we carried almost seventy pounds each on our backs.

"Move out," said Dobelmann.

As we headed off from the supply dump, then down long slopes through forests of pine, I was struck with an odd notion. All around me were soldiers, rifles in hand. I had the strange feeling that I was being escorted by bodyguards, that the sole purpose of all the others was to protect me.

It was midmorning when we reached a crossroads, the remains of Vinnitsa all around. Bent beneath the weight of our heavy packs, in loose columns, we made our way down what was left of the main street of town. From the ruins, grimy, desolate-looking German soldiers watched us with blank gazes. Blasted-out cellars had been turned into makeshift bunkers sprouting machine guns. On the roof of a ruined theater, snipers and spotters lay spread-eagled, scanning the outlying fields through binoculars and telescopic-rifle sights. With my gaze turned upward on them, I almost walked headlong into a trolley car—rusting, off its tracks, and with layers of sandbags on the roof. As I skirted it, from within came hushed voices speaking in German. They stopped. A face appeared in a window. Briefly, disinterested eyes met mine; then the face disappeared.

Most of Vinnitsa had been reduced to long piles of rubble. A few structures remained standing, though many of these were little more than shells. Vividly, I remember one two-story place. Most of the front had been sheared off, leaving a clear view into the somewhat intact interior. It reminded me of home; the lower floor had been a shop of some kind, the upper story had been the living quarters. A red-and-white checkered curtain in an upstairs room fluttered in the breeze.

"Auf Wiedersehen!"

Next door to the place, two soldiers sat at the foot of a stairway that went nowhere. One called out "good-bye" in German, and then gave us a mocking little wave. The other, using a finger as a make-believe knife, made a slashing motion across his throat.

Soon, we were headed up a long slope, leaving Vinnitsa behind. It began to rain. Gentle spray turned into a downpour. A cold wind gusted. *Gummimäntels*, rubberized shawls, were pulled from packs. Heads lowered to heavy, drifting sheets of rain, we trudged on.

We finally reached the crest. Our platoon rested briefly. Then we were on our way again—long, broken queues of us, slogging along a road that wound around through low, barren mountains. Rain danced on helmets and *Gummimäntels*. Sodden clothing clung to our bodies. Boots were thick with mud.

I didn't think I could make it. By the weight of the pack, I was being crushed—downward and forward. Of-

ten, when the grade got especially steep, I leaned far forward. I felt like a mule with a dead man on its back.

Once I stopped for only a couple of seconds, struggling to catch my wind. Dobelmann screamed in my ear: "Get moving!" He lowered his voice. "The faster you go, the sooner this will be over."

"Danke, Feldwebel."

I thanked Dobelmann. I straightened my back and kept going.

Perhaps an hour later, trucks began passing us. Gradually, out of the fog and rain, a network of bunkers came into view, as did veterans, many of them gathered in clusters under dripping awnings of canvas and corrugated iron. Eyeing us suspiciously, they watched our approach, then motioned us forward with their weapons.

"Battalion headquarters," someone behind me said.

I looked around at a labyrinth of interconnected trenches, bunkers, and artillery emplacements, including tanks that had been backed into sandbagged niches. Other than their long cannons, they were all but invisible. The same was true of the bunkers. Dug into the hillside itself, only stout timbers and sandbags marked their presence.

A man a few steps ahead of me stopped. He turned around. I found myself almost face-to-face with Dobelmann.

"Seventh Platoon," he barked into the rain.

Jakob, Oskar, Hals, and others from our platoon appeared beside me. Dobelmann conferred with another

Feldwebel. A few moments later, he led us splashing along through deep trenches, up to our ankles in water and muck. He stopped and aimed a dripping hand at the entrance to a bunker. "We are going to have to break up the platoon, at least temporarily. The first five of you, in there. The rest of you, follow me."

Eager to get out of the rain, I followed Oskar, Jakob, and two other boys onto a low platform of rough-hewn timbers, then pushed past a canvas sheet covering the entrance.

"Ah, so what have we here!" a voice exclaimed light-heartedly from the semidarkness as we filed into the bunker.

With the others, I moved tentatively ahead, half blind in the dim light, enshrouded in warm, stale air that reeked of cabbage and unwashed bodies. As my eyes adjusted, the interior of the surprisingly large bunker came into focus.

Two junior officers engaged in a game of chess scarcely looked up, but grimy men lounging in bunks and gathered around a combination furnace and stove were eyeing us. All had matching, sneering grins on their faces. Our presence, as we stood there unsure of what to do, seemed to amuse and disgust them at the same time.

"Karl," said one, "our reinforcements have arrived!"

"Ah, then we are saved!" came the reply.

A man in filthy long underwear sauntered toward us. Mouth bulging with a great lump of chewing tobacco, he stopped in front of me. Scowling, he looked me up and

down with dark, slanted eyes. His round face was dirty and bristling with an uneven stubble of black beard, and his teeth were covered with green and brown scum.

"All the men are dead," he said, gazing contemptuously at us. "Now they are sending us boys." He spat a gob of tobacco juice, and then shaking his head, wandered away.

The Welcoming Party

The bunker was one large, long room. The ceiling was of wood slats, the walls of sandbags and heavy beams, and the floor of hard-packed earth. Much of the space was taken up by wooden bunk beds, odds and ends of other furniture, and a potbellied stove. An arrangement of tin cans connected together formed a stovepipe, which disappeared up through a hole in the ceiling. Rainwater constantly dribbled down the thing, and there was a pair of muddy pools on the floor. Wet clothing hung everywhere—from the corner posts of bunks and from lines that had been strung up.

There were five of us “reinforcements,” as we were referred to, in the place. Hals, to my disappointment, was not among our group. I knew Jakob and Oskar well; muscle-bound Meyer Fassnacht was among our group, as was a chirpy, undersize soldier named Willi.

“Your luncheon is ready,” a fat soldier in a filthy apron announced, his tone mockingly ceremonious.

We piled our packs near a ceiling support beam. Then,

The Welcoming Party

still in our wet clothes, we lined up with our mess kits near where a large kettle bubbled pungently on the stove.

“I hope what I have made is to your liking,” the fat man said, as he and another man doled out bread and tea, then ladled soup into our bowls. “You look as though you have had a hard time of it, a long, hard walk in the rain.” He laughed. “Have you had a long, hard walk, boys?”

No one answered him. Continuing to wonder at the strange way we were being treated—at the contempt the veterans had for us—we sat down at a greasy wooden table and began eating in silence. The tea was weak, without flavor; the bread was ersatz—made of flour mixed with sawdust—and was difficult to swallow; but the soup—of cabbage, carrot tops, and chunks of meat—was thick and good. Ravenous, I downed it all within short order, as did the others, and we were pleased when we were offered more. Even the tea, weak though it was, at least was hot; and the bread, though it tasted like soggy wood, was still filling.

“There’s one!” a wild-haired man suddenly shouted.

His excited call captured the attention of all the veterans in the bunker, except the two officers wrapped up in their chess game. Armed with bayonets, clubs, and sharpened sticks, the motley bunch descended on a corner at the back of the place. Wondering what all the commotion was about, we made our way to where they were gathered.

"There's a whole nest of 'em in there I tell you," the wild-haired man chortled. He was on his knees, aiming the beam of a flashlight through gaps in the wall of sandbags.

"Ya, I think I see them!" A big-nosed man began jabbing away with a long stick.

"What's in there?" Jakob asked.

"Rats," replied a rather soft-spoken soldier. "The walls are crawling with them. Killing rats—that is our mission in life in this stinking hellhole."

"Good source of protein," said our cook. "And tasty!" he laughed.

It took a moment for what he had just told us to sink in. My eyes met those of Jakob, Meyer, Oskar, and Willi. Together we looked to the pot of soup and then to our near-empty mess tins on the greasy table.

"Meat is in short supply," said the cook, a wry grin on his face. "So we have to make do as best we can."

"I like rat meat," I said, not wanting him to get the better of me. I fought off a sudden wave of nausea. "I've had it on a number of occasions."

"I have, too," said tall, lanky Oskar, his voice feeble and unconvincing. He started to say something else, then bolted from the bunker as the veterans laughed. Over the sound of their laughter—and of the rain—we could hear him retching outside.

The rat hunters howled, the cook loudest of all. Finally, snickering and wiping dumb grins from their faces, they returned to the attack. All business now, and very ex-

cited, the bunch of them began scurrying about along the wall, trying to peer behind it, now and then jabbing away with their various weapons.

"You in there, you filthy beasts?" a huge, hulking man screamed at the wall. "Well, if you are, this'll kill ya!" He swallowed air, pressed his open mouth to a space between two support beams, and discharged a loud and long-lasting belch.

"There it goes!" yelled another man, and immediately there was a flurry of wild jabbings and thrustings with various sharp instruments at the back wall of the bunker. Over the laughing and cursing there suddenly came a series of wretched squeals from behind the wall, and when the weapons were withdrawn they were covered with blood and gore. The men tried to extract the dead rat by yanking on its long, naked tail. But finding that the creature was too large to be pulled through the narrow gap, with great delight they commenced hacking it to bits and removing its corpse piece by piece.

Another attack was then quickly launched in another part of the bunker.

Sopping wet, Oskar returned.

"Sorry," he said.

"For what?" I said.

Jakob patted him on the back.

Cold, tired, and disgusted, the bunch of us began to idle about, wondering what we were supposed to do with ourselves.

"Sir," I said, taking it upon myself to approach one of the chess-playing junior officers, "where would you like us to put our gear?"

"Take any one of the empty bunks," he replied without looking up from the game.

"You will not be here long anyway," said his chess partner.

Wondering what this comment meant, I put my pack at the foot of one of the bunks, then sat down and began removing my muddy boots.

"Hey, not *that* bunk!" The man in filthy long underwear was coming toward me with a bloody bayonet. "That's Lindemann's bunk! What are you taking his for?"

"Sorry," I said, getting up. "I didn't know it belonged to someone else."

For some reason, my response was greeted with snickering laughter, and a moment later the five of us newcomers found ourselves surrounded by rat hunters.

"What made you think you had the right to take Lindemann's bunk?" the wild-haired man demanded.

The man in the filthy long underwear moved to within an inch of my nose. He shifted the bulge of chewing tobacco from one cheek to the other. "Taking Lindemann's bunk was a real low-down thing to do, *Dummkopf!*" he said, filling my nostrils with his reeking breath, grinning all the while.

I stood looking at the man, not knowing what to say. That I and the other newcomers were being goaded and

toyed with was more than obvious. But what was the big joke? What exactly was all this nonsense about? Uneasy, surrounded by this smirking, bullying bunch, the five of us were at a loss as to what to do.

"Which bunks should we take, then?" Jakob asked, his voice cracking with nerves.

"Well," said a man scratching at a boil on his neck, "you can take Erhardt's or Ritter's or Klopp's. Or I guess it really wouldn't matter if you took Lindemann's."

"I don't understand," said Jakob.

"They're all dead." Mr. Long-Underwear squirted a jet of brown tobacco juice from a gap between his scum-coated teeth. "What is there to understand about that? Ritter, Klopp, Gruber, Pedersen, Erhardt, and Stroebel—they're dead. Lindemann, too."

"We have enough bunks for all of you," a little man with vacant eyes said dolefully.

"Gone to a better place," said Mr. Long-Underwear, "as we all will for our Führer!" He clicked his heels together as his right arm shot forward in stiff salute. "*Heil Hitler!*"

One of the junior officers looked over at him with an absently disapproving look, then returned to his game.

Mr. Long-Underwear put a grimy hand on my shoulder. "Lindemann got it yesterday, or was it the day before?" He turned to his comrades for an answer.

"The day before," replied the wild-haired one.

"Was he your friend?" I asked.

"Haven't got any. It is unwise to have friends, because they have a bad habit of getting killed. In some fashion or the other, everyone meets with an unfortunate accident." He suddenly cocked his head to listen. At first there was only a delicate humming somewhere above, then the sound swelled to a monstrous drone. The bunker convulsed as a deafening crash drowned out every other sound. Jakob, Fassnacht, and Willi scuttled under tables, chairs, and bunks. Terrified, Oskar and I grabbed hold of a swaying support beam. I stared at the ceiling; sand trickled down from the gaps between planks. Black smoke poured in through a lookout slit at the front of the bunker, and chess pieces and cutlery danced off tables and clattered to the floor.

"Almost a direct hit," said Mr. Long-Underwear matter-of-factly.

Neither he nor any of the other veterans had bothered to take cover, with the exception of the sad-eyed little man. Shaking with fear, he was curled in a ball near Jakob's feet, hugging himself and making a strange whining sound. The chess players were scrabbling around for kings and queens and rooks and pawns, bemoaning the destruction of their game.

"Let's see, where was I?" mused Mr. Long-Underwear, sitting down on a footlocker and looking up at me. "Ah, yes, we were discussing the departure of Private Lindemann from this earth. It was quite an ugly death," he said,

raising his voice over the sound of a heavy detonation somewhere in the distance. "They say he was found pinned to the bottom of a trench by a seventy-six-millimeter shell. The bomb fin, I'm told, protruded from his back like a ventilator. Went right through his back and chest and then into the ground, but didn't explode."

"But even so, it killed him," the fat cook added with black humor.

"He was here only a matter of hours," said the wild-haired man. "He was lucky. Lucky Lindemann—he got to die quickly!" He gestured toward the bed where I had been sitting. "Go ahead, take his bunk. Who knows, maybe you'll be lucky, too!"

Prisoners

Early the next morning we were put to work repairing damage done by the rain and artillery fire. Trenches had collapsed and some were half filled with muck and water.

Though it was foggy, I had a much clearer picture than the day before of where we were. The bunkers were near the top and center of a horseshoe-shaped range of hills, the slopes of which were a fortress of trenches and heavy-artillery emplacements. Below was more of the same. Stretching far off into the distance was a muddy flatland of zigzagging trenches, redoubts, blockhouses, and tank traps. Beyond that lay empty flatland with nothing but black veins of charcoal. Though I could see nothing of them, the Russians, I heard it said, were encamped somewhere to the northeast, and their numbers were growing daily.

Hals was in the same work detail with Jakob, Oskar, and me; we were glad to be with our friend again. Dobelmann and other *Feldwebels* were in charge of us, directing us as we toiled away on the grubby, backbreaking chore.

Prisoners

We scooped bucketfuls of brown water from the trenches, restacked sandbags that had fallen, and filled more bags—gunnysacks—with mud. We were soon sopping wet and filthy. Of the *Felds*, only Dobelmann got his hands dirty, so to speak, and actually helped with the work.

Later that afternoon, caked with mud, bone weary, my hands lumpy with blisters, I returned to our bunker. Having worked more than nine hours, I wanted nothing more than to crawl into my bunk and sleep. I was cleaning up as best I could when a major's adjutant pushed in through the canvas-draped doorway to the place. Stripped down to an undershirt, pants, and boots, I snapped to attention—as did everyone, including the rat hunters, seeming as though they'd suddenly been transformed into real soldiers. The adjutant, to my surprise, called out my name. I stepped forward and saluted.

"Prisoners were taken last night during a probe, Private Brandt," said the adjutant, a well-groomed, handsome man who reeked of cologne. "You will come with me, please."

He did not even wait for me to get into uniform. I pulled on a heavy sweater from home, and then hurrying to catch up, followed the man and his scent up a well-traveled path. Over the brow of a hill, we passed row after row of tanks, then approached what appeared to be a huge pigpen enclosed by barbed wire. Inside were twenty or thirty Russian soldiers. Nearby, under a canvas awning, at a crude desk made of boards propped up on boxes, sat a stoop-shouldered little corporal and a lieutenant with

thick glasses. Magnified eyes looked me up and down as I was handed a list.

"You will ask these questions—in Russian—then translate the responses for me," the corporal ordered.

The bespectacled lieutenant yelled to the guards, telling them to "bring out the monkeys."

The guards began hustling prisoners out from the barbed-wire enclosure. All the Russians were barefooted, and though it was bitterly cold, most were shirtless. None had identity tags, such as those we German soldiers wore; instead, they carried papers, which they turned over to the corporal.

"How many men are in your division? How many tanks? How well are your troops fed? Are your gasoline supplies sufficient? When is the offensive on our position to be launched?"

Over and over I asked these and other questions in Russian, then translated the answers into German. The corporal took careful notes. If a prisoner refused—or even hesitated—to answer, either the lieutenant or adjutant put a gun to his head. The last question, that concerning an anticipated Russian offensive, was the most important. But none of the prisoners—all ordinary foot soldiers—knew when it was to begin. Even with a gun pointed at them, the most precise answer any gave was "soon."

The prisoners were a dismal, wretched-looking bunch. I remember only two of them at all. One was a skinny man who had been hit in the left elbow, and whose bare arm

looked like a bent red stick. He asked for medical attention. When I translated, the lieutenant laughed. The other Russian I remember most was a tough-looking character who, after being interrogated, glanced at me and, under his breath, hissed "*abarot!*" Russian for "traitor." Apparently he had concluded that I was a Russian who had sold out to the enemy—not only because I spoke the language fluently but also because I was out of uniform.

After the interrogation, the prisoners were led off under heavy guard toward a wooded area. I asked the cologne-reeking adjutant what was going to be done with them.

"They will be digging latrines," he replied, a tiny smirk on his face.

The corporal belly-laughed.

It was not latrines the prisoners would be digging.