



SOLDIER

D O N W U L F F S O N

The Front

The following afternoon our platoon was ordered down to front-line trenches. Hals, Jakob, Oskar, and the rest of us followed Dobelmann down one of the steep, crisscrossing trails leading from the bunkers and artillery emplacements on the hill. Rifles in hand, lugging full packs, we made our way across the flatlands toward our most forward line of defenses—a vast, semicircular maze of interconnecting open trenches. Beyond was a blackened wasteland of rolling hills. It had once been a forest; the blasted remains of a few trees still sprouted from the sooty ground. Strung between these were coils of barbed wire.

We relieved the Fifth Platoon. The soldiers—mostly young reinforcements, like us—were a dirty, weary, and miserable-looking bunch. When Dobelmann informed them that they were being relieved and sent to the rear, up to the fortified bunkers behind us on the hill, they were overjoyed.

Smiling, they scrambled out of the trenches.

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Scared, we scrambled in.

Four feet wide and four feet deep, the almost shoulder-high trenches were muddy, littered with trash of every sort, and stank of urine and rotting garbage. All around, the soil was cratered and plowed looking, as though an insane farmer had tilled his land into a mindless pattern of furrows. Only boots, burned cloth, and chunks of metal grew from them.

“A Russian assault is probably imminent.”

Dobelmann gathered us together.

“An attack could come at any time. It may be just a probe, or it may be an all-out assault.” Steel blue eyes in the disfigured face scrutinized us. “They cannot go around us or outflank us. To our right flank is swampland; to our left is the river, the Pript. Our artillery atop the hill behind you gives us command of the surrounding land. The Ivans must take the hill, and to do so they must first come through our front lines—through *you*. They will try to—”

Momentarily silencing Dobelmann—and startling all of us—Mr. Long-Underwear and two other veterans dropped feet-first into the trench. More followed. They were all business. They laid stick grenades in neat rows on the sandbags fronting the trench. Machine guns were set up on tripod stands. We watched as the one nearest us was loaded by locking down a heavy, glistening belt of ammunition into the breech. Metal boxes filled with more ammunition were placed within easy reach, as were

wooden boxes containing flares and grenades. With a bayonet, a moon-faced man pried off the lid of a long box then removed a tubelike weapon. Dobelmann asked for the thing.

"How familiar are you with the use of a *Panzerfaust*?" asked Dobelmann, cradling the heavy weapon.

Only the muscular Meyer Fassnacht and a boy with a gold-capped front tooth had ever fired one before, Dobelmann quickly discovered. The scars on his face turned to angry red lines. "Didn't they teach you *anything* in training camp?" he demanded.

Oskar's Adam's Apple bobbed up and down. "No, sir. At least not much. I was in camp only three weeks. Our *Obergefreiter* said we'd learn soon enough all we needed to know once we got to the front."

Dobelmann waited a moment before beginning to speak again. He patted the hollow metal tube. "The *Panzerfaust* is a rocket launcher, primarily an antitank weapon," he began, then continued, explaining how it was operated as it was passed from hand to hand.

"What else—if anything—did they teach you?" asked our platoon leader.

A platter-faced boy spoke up. "How to clean, load, and fire a rifle." He smiled faintly. "And how to prepare and throw a grenade."

"First you unscrew the safety cap," said Jakob, interrupting and trying to show that he knew as much as Plat-

ter Face. "Then you count to three, pull out the red button, and then give it a toss!"

"Incredible!" muttered Dobelmann.

"Thank you," said Jakob, mistaking this for a compliment.

"*Nein, mein Knabe!* No, son, what I mean is that it is 'incredible' that they are not only sending children into this slaughterhouse, this abattoir, they have not really trained you—at all." He picked up a stick grenade, removed the safety cap, then pointed to an exposed button-like projection. "Look, young man," he said to all of us, but directing his gaze at Jakob. "You wait a three-count after pulling out the *button*, not after unscrewing the cap."

"Yes, *Feldwebel*," Jakob stammered, his face turning red with embarrassment.

Dobelmann continued with his impromptu lesson. He went over the use of flares, machine guns, bayonets, and then mines.

"Crank the plunger counterclockwise," he said, indicating a box from which wires trailed out into the scarred, black earth beyond our trench. "Lift the plunger. Give it a quarter-turn clockwise, then push it down." He pointed at shell craters about a hundred meters off. "When the Ivans come, they will jump into the shell holes which we have packed with detonation cord, dynamite, and S-4 mines. When they jump in, blow them back out—in pieces."

"In pieces'?" said Hals, his voice a breathy whisper.

Tense eyes, shaded by the lip of a helmet, were locked on Dobelmann.

"It is either you or them, *Knabe*. You are fighting for your lives and for those of your *Kameraden*."

He paused. A silence settled over our group in the trench, and again he looked from face to face. My stomach clenched in a knot as Dobelmann's gaze came to a rest on me—then on my rifle, a standard-issue four-cartridge Mauser. He took it from my hands and held it up.

"Always take good care of your weapon," he said. "Treat it with the respect, care, and gentleness you would a lady. Treat your weapon well, and it will treat you well." He handed the rifle back to me, and then crossing his arms over his chest, looked me in the eye. "But what's your best and most important weapon, boys?" he asked.

The question was directed at me, and I was supposed to answer it, I felt. "I don't know, *Feldwebel*," I said, wiping hands wet with nerves on my pants, and hanging my head. I felt stupid, as though I had failed an important test.

Dobelmann pointed at his head. "Your most important weapon is your brain—your mind power. Things may get very rough—far more so than you think possible. When that happens, and you're so scared you think you are going to lose your mind—don't! Do not lose control. If you do—if you permit that to happen—then you will be dead." He scowled. "I hope you are paying very close attention to what I am saying. Are you?"

"*Ja, Feldwebel*," we answered in unison.

"Remember—always, always, always keep your wits about you." He wiped away perspiration that had collected in a webwork of scars beneath one eye. "If heavy shelling should start, just keep down. Think about nothing but what is coming next and what you must do to be ready for it."

Ready for what? I wanted to ask, but nothing came out.

"When the shelling is over, that is when the tanks and infantry come. Fire everything you've got—and keep firing. *Panzerfausts* at the tanks. Mortars, mines, and *fausts* will disable or destroy some—maybe most—coming your way. But if tanks start breaking through, do *not* panic. You can run laterally through the trenches, and you can belly-crawl backwards, but never—*never*—get up and try to run away. If you get up, you are dead. You've got a better chance of surviving by just staying in your trench and letting the tanks pass over. Your rifles and grenades—use those on the infantry. Bring down all you can. But the time may come when there is really no more that you can do. And if the Russians have breached our lines and are all around, and you have no chance of escaping, just play dead." He smiled crookedly. "Play dead . . . but keep thinking." Strong blue eyes blinked inside a mask of horrors. "Good luck, gentlemen," he said, coming out of a crouch. "Hopefully, the *Ivans* will not come at us on our shift. But if they do, be ready." After assigning us all different tasks, he left us. On some mission known only to

himself, he headed away down the trench, past ever-growing numbers of our troops.

That evening a kitchen truck brought us hot rations. As we ate, Jakob and Willi began talking about Dobelmann. Not only had we all come to look up to him, there was something very mysterious about the man. Long-Underwear, who had been listening idly to us, leaning back against the trench wall and smoking a cigarette, turned his head our way. Listlessly, he blew a stream of blue-gray smoke at us.

"Rolf Dobelmann was a philosophy teacher and gymnastics instructor," said Long-Underwear. "He's married and has three kids. After a grenade went off almost in his face, and after months in a hospital, he had a friend write a letter home that he was dead. He was too ashamed of how he looked to go home. He reenlisted. The war took everything from him. The war, now, is all he has left."

From ten P.M. to one A.M. I was posted with two veterans as forward lookouts about half a kilometer beyond our lines. Each of us had a flare gun, and we were told to fire a blue flare if we saw any large-scale movement. We saw nothing.

After our relief showed up, we made our way back to our lines, through the endless labyrinth of open trenches. I

crawled into our trench, pulled a blanket over myself, and immediately fell asleep.

I'm not really sure when the artillery barrage began. It was a couple of hours before dawn, I think. At first it did nothing but annoy me. All I wanted to do was sleep, but that quickly became impossible.

I sat up and looked around.

I saw a long, open trench full of scared faces. The closest was Jakob's. His mouth was open, and the explosions made his teeth flash red, like little neon signs going on and off. Hals was stuffing packets of bullets into the multiple pockets of his cartridge belt. Across from me, skinny Oskar was a stiff silhouette. He looked like a pole with a helmet balanced on it.

At first, most of the rounds were landing far behind us, blasting away at our heavily fortified bunkers on the hill-sides. There was a lull; then suddenly I heard a sound like a freight train coming directly at us. I lay flat in the bottom of the trench. There was a huge flash, then the bottom of the trench bounced up into me. Dirt and debris rained down. Shrapnel whizzed past. More freight-train-like shells hurtled through the night. I curled into a ball in the trench as the whole world seemed to detonate.

"Stop it!" Jakob screamed.

As if in response, the shelling suddenly ended.

"It's over," mumbled Hals. "Is it over?"

Warily, we rose up. I looked into the black, cold maw

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of night, then behind me at a landscape dotted with what looked like hundreds of little campfires, all started by the shelling.

"My hand hurts," said Willi.

"Oh," I said.

Willi held up his arm. It was only a stump.

"Medic!" Jakob screamed.

A Souvenir

Dawn came as a backlit, silver shroud of fog.

In the bombardment of the night before, many areas of our trenchworks had collapsed. Wretched and dirty, we repaired the damage and rebuilt the trenches as well as we were able. A horse-drawn cart, carrying those who had been killed during the night, rattled past. Fortunately, we had none to add to the five or six blanket-wrapped bundles in the wagon. Willi had been our only casualty of the night.

We ate when we could. I found some crackers in my pack and shared them with the others.

I remember Hals cutting an apple with a bayonet and giving a wedge to Jakob, Oskar, Fassnacht, and me. I remember chewing as I looked around at the vast network of trenches and gun emplacements that made up our front lines, fog rendering it all grainy and surreal. I remember Dobelmann and another veteran pulling a damp tarpaulin off a machine gun. I do not remember the shrieking whines that in-coming shells make; I have no memory of

the sound of artillery, nor any of the blast that knocked me right out of the trench.

I was brought back to consciousness by explosions, screams, and a rain of hot mud. My mouth tasted of blood and apple, and everything around me was coming apart. Someone grabbed hold of me and was pulling me by the arms. I couldn't see who it was; everything was out of focus, including the person trying to help me. I cried out in pain; my shoulders felt as though they were being ripped out of their sockets as I was dragged back to the trench—and then pulled face-first into it.

The bombardment continued. I just lay on my side in the trench. The shelling tapered off. Only as it came to an end did I really start to come to my senses. I forced myself to a sitting position, with my back to the wall of the trench. I realized Hals was beside me, and wondered why he was just sitting there like that. I was surprised when he leaned over and put his head on my shoulder.

"What are you doing?" I asked, feeling confused and irritated.

He said nothing; he just continued to rest his head against me. It was then I noticed the warmth, the wetness. Blood was spilling from a gash in his deeply dented helmet. His eyes were blank, dotted with mud.

I put my arms around him. I sobbed. I screamed his name, shaking him, trying to shake him back to life.

A strong hand had grabbed hold of my shirt. Dobelmann pulled me around to stare him in the face.

"There's no time for that, boy!"

I cursed him.

He patted my shoulder and he shoved Hals's rifle into my hands. A moment later I was at the lip of the trench, between Oskar and a bearded veteran. I felt nothing—only the tears drying on my cheeks. In my hands was the Mauser, resting in a crevice between two sandbags and pointed into rolling morning fog.

"Hals is dead."

"I know," replied Oskar, his voice a lifeless monotone.

I realized that artillery was still being fired, but now it was coming from *our* side, from the heavy artillery emplacements on the hill behind us.

"We're shelling them," said Oskar

"But they're not shelling us," I added.

"That's because they're coming now!" hissed Dobelmann.

Feuern!

I looked back at Hals, then again forward. A heavy, hot bead of sweat spilled down my temple. Gripping my rifle, my finger on the trigger, I stared into a blinding fog.

An eerie quiet settled over everything.

I became aware of a distant squealing, from somewhere deep in the haze.

"Tanks," I said to Oskar.

"Infantry first," said Dobelmann. "They will throw infantry at us first."

From our lines, green flares were fired, turning the fog an odd chartreuse color. The flares had been a signal to our mortar crews. Projectiles were dropped backward down hollow tubes; the tubes coughed them back out—as far as seven hundred meters. Rendered invisible by speed and fog, the high-arcing projectiles seemed simply to disappear, then heavy *kruumphs* sounded somewhere deep in the haze.

The mortars stopped firing briefly.

"Hold your fire!" Dobelmann growled at us.

Feuern!

All along our lines, helmets gleamed darkly, wetly. Our trenches bristled with weapons, pointed at the screen of fog. Coming from somewhere in it was the sound of hundreds of fast, heavy footfalls. Men in boots running; gear rattling; panting.

Getting louder.

Getting closer.

At two hundred meters, Russians burst screaming out of the fog.

"*Feuern!*" Dobelmann yelled for us to open fire.

Our lines erupted. Again and again, I pulled the trigger, fired at oncoming brown uniforms, reloaded, kept firing. Adding to the horror of sound, all along our lines, mortars, light artillery, and machine guns blasted at the Russians. More and more brown uniforms crumpled, went down. Still, endless numbers kept coming. Some stepped on land mines; they and those around them disintegrated. Mortar and artillery rounds scissored others. At a hundred meters, many were snared by barbed wire. They struggled to get free of the stuff, twisting and turning in every direction.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four.

I counted my shots as I fired the semiautomatic Mauser in my hands at men entangled helplessly in barbed wire.

Bullets.

At first I did not know where they were coming from. They peppered the ground around me, kicked fans of dirt

in my face. They pinged off metal, ricocheted off the concrete blockhouse to my left. The air whined with them. They thumped against sandbags, and they tore through flesh.

A veteran to my right screamed. He grabbed his face; blood spilled through his fingers. Putting an end to his agony, a bullet hole suddenly appeared in his helmet, and he dropped to the bottom of the trench, dead.

"Bastards!" I screamed.

I saw gun flashes coming from in front of us, from Russians hiding behind whatever little cover the land provided, and hiding behind their own dead.

I fired, trying to hit men moving about in a crouch. I aimed, fired four shots, then fumbled shells out of my cartridge belt, spilling many as I reloaded, then aimed again. Looking down my gun sight, I saw men draped with barbed wire. I took careful aim; I fired. A fifty-caliber in the blockhouse hammered them.

A human form slithered into a shell crater and joined a group of steel helmets collecting there, not eighty meters away. A Russian machine gun appeared on the lip of the crater.

"When the Ivans come, they will jump into the shell holes. They're packed with detonation cord, dynamite, and S-4 mines." Dobelmann's words going round and round in my head, I searched for the detonator box, only to find it already in Jakob's dirty hands. Eyes wide, he gave the

plunger a quarter turn, then shoved it down. Not one, but an entire network, of craters erupted.

"Did you see that?" Jakob yelled, seeming both startled and pleased by what he had just done.

More craters in that wasteland exploded.

Then there was just the chatter of machine-gun fire coming from our lines, and occasional pops and bangs of rifle fire. Scattered groups of Russians were running away beneath a drifting ceiling of smoke and fog. Some of the fleeing brown uniforms went down, hit in the back. I realized I was seeing all of this through one eye: My left eye was closed; with my right, I was looking down the hot barrel of my rifle. But I was not firing.

I could not shoot anymore.

I lowered my Mauser.

Numb, I watched as the last few Russians limped away. Some made it, some did not.

It's over, I thought. "Thank God."

"Cease fire!" Someone yelled.

A few more pops of rifle fire from our lines.

Then there was only silence. My ears were so used to the blathering of battle that the quiet was startling. I stared. The fog was breaking up, dissolving. I looked out at yellow sunshine bathing the ground below. In many places, it was carpeted with the dead, lit an ethereal gold-yellow for a moment by a combination of fog and sun. I remembered a scene painted on an interior wall of a

mind when I suddenly realized the fight was not over; it had only begun.

"Now they will be hitting us hard," said Dobelmann.

I wondered what he was talking about.

"Check your ammunition!"

I felt in my bullet pouch. Only a few cartridges remained. As others were doing, I grabbed bullets from an ammunition box and refilled my cartridge belt. I was reloading the Mauser when I became aware of a distant squealing. Off in the black, undulating field ahead, tanks loomed into view—seeming to rise up from the bowels of the earth.

"*Mein Gott im Himmel!*" mumbled Oskar. "Dear God in heaven!"

A sudden quiet settled over our lines. All that could be heard was the horrid squeal of the tanks. Russian infantrymen jogged behind, many in a half-crouch.

"A full, frontal assault," whispered a veteran, his voice full of terror.

I looked from him to Oskar. His scared eyes met mine.

"Hold your fire!" Dobelmann ordered, an edge of fear to his voice, a *Panzerfaust* in hand. "Wait till they're in range."

German heavy artillery, far behind us on the hill, began firing—and continued nonstop. Our light artillery and mortars joined in. Red explosions flowered everywhere amidst the tanks and infantry. Adding to the incredible blathering of noise, the Russians were answering back

with their own long-range ordnance—the shells seeming to come from nowhere, from miles away. Tank cannons flashed at us. The ground vibrated with detonations. Part of our trench collapsed. I fell. I heard screams. I saw a boot with a foot in it.

I was looking up into red, black-rimmed eyes as Oskar pulled me back to my feet. He was saying something, but I did not know what.

A chorus of defiant, fearsome yells was coming from the Russian infantry. Thousands of men, it seemed. They were running. And the tanks—I was horrified at how fast they were coming. Sheer terror made my whole body feel cement-hard. It was difficult to move, even to breathe. I heard a cry; I looked over my shoulder.

A tourniquet was around Fassnacht's leg. He was looking at the boot with his foot in it, and crying in pain and cursing as someone dragged him away by the arms.

The tanks grew closer. Ugly green, with a red star.

"*Feuern!*" Dobelmann yelled.

Like a shooting gallery. From all along our lines came crackling pops from rifles. And then the staccato rattle of machine guns.

Green tanks. Brown uniforms. I aimed at the men, firing as fast as I could. Just shooting. Not knowing if I was hitting any of them. Most kept coming. I felt like I was firing blanks.

"I can't stop them!" I screamed.

A moment later I found myself heaving grenades. I

was amidst a group, all of us doing the same. We kept tossing grenades as fast as we could, as far as we could. Like kids throwing rocks.

A tank's cannon was turning in our direction. I stood frozen, awaiting its blast. Instead, coming from behind me, a sizzling hiss passed my ear. The tank lifted up on its treads and made a gonglike noise. It ruptured from within, blew apart like a tin box.

I looked at Dobelmann, a smoking *Panzerfaust* on his shoulder.

Bullets peppered all around me.

Out of a chaos of smoke and erupting soil, more tanks emerged. Pitching and bucking crazily, they bore down on us, ripping through wire entanglements and rolling over the bodies of their own dead and wounded. One tank was knocked off course by a mortar round, but then it was moving again—directly at us, and wobbling. Another spilled its treads, and came limping to a stop. It began to burn; a crewman, his clothes in flames, ran out of the wreckage and right into the path of another tank. I saw men thrown into the air. A broken, life-size rag doll of a body landed on the turret of a tank. It was as if it had been dropped from heaven. With the body still on its turret, the tank's twin machine guns hammered us.

All along our lines, men dropped.

"My God!" screamed Oskar. "*Mein Gott!*"

Off to my right, I glimpsed a tank speed past, through our lines and right over the trench there.

"Oskar! No!"

He had thrown his rifle down and was fleeing, as were others. Oskar, like a skinny horse on just its rear legs, was galloping awkwardly away. He and another man were punched in the back at the same time and sent sprawling by the tank's machine guns. Oskar struggled to his feet, only to go down again, battered by another spray of bullets.

"Fix bayonets!" someone yelled.

My bayonet dangled in its scabbard from my belt; there was no time to attempt to slide it into the lock on the barrel of my rifle. Russian soldiers were already leaping into the trench, and all about me was a frenzy of hand-to-hand combat. I fired my rifle point-blank into the shirt of a soldier; at the same moment, I felt something jab my arm from behind. Squealing in pain and abject horror, using my rifle as a club, I slammed it down on the helmet of a Russian.

"No!" he cried in Russian. "*Nyet Pazhalusta!*"

I was looking at his face. I couldn't shoot him. I turned and ran; a slippery smear of flesh and gore in the trench sent me flying. I landed in a heap. Rising to my knees, someone slammed into me, knocking me sideways onto corpses and debris. I saw Germans running. I struggled to my feet. Something speared my right knee. I screamed in agony. I fell against the back wall of the trench. I stared in frozen horror. A mammoth tank—dragging great, long strands of barbed wire with it—churned out from clouds

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of smoke and dust. It rose up on the sandbagged front edge of the trench—one of its huge iron treads clawing at air—the other broken, unrolling. For a moment it stood suspended above me. I dove for the ground, screaming, as the thing's massive underbelly came down at me.