LITERARY PAGE

The Defense of Tivorsk ...

(Ed. Note.—This story was awarded first prize in the Marshall-Case-Haycox short story contest.)

By TED GOODWIN

"You sent for me, sir?" I stood before my commanding officer, glad to be inside the relatively warm office of the planning department.

"Yes, at ease." The colonel looked hard at me. "We can counter-attack on the German flank and hold our losses to one company."

"How, sir?"

"That one company will hold this village. The regiment will evacuate tonight and swing south to attack the Nemetski flank as they advance on the plain to the west. Our intelligence reports preparations for an attack on Tivorsk. Their main strength will be concentrated on the village. We will attack them from the south."

"What is my mission, sir?"

"You will command the company that holds Tivorsk."

I saluted, "I understand, sir."

"Here are your orders." He handed me an envelope. "Tivorsk will fall, but it must be held for three days. By that time we will have destroyed their flank and reserves. You must kill as many as possible so they cannot organize a defense in the village."

"And after three days . . . ?"

"For three days you must hold out." The colonel explained.

The colonel indicated a chair before he continued, "The enemy thinks to trap our regiment in this village. We will engage in open combat and then take the railroad he will leave undefended in the rear. After accomplishing our primary mission, we will return here and mop up. You have met the Nemetski before, Captain, perhaps you will be here when the regiment returns. Shall we drink to it?"

He fished for a small flagon of vodka. "One thinks of many things," he said, "when assigning missions. Men are spent here to save three days, in another place to save three hours. Yet there is such a waste. Not in our country any more but it is told that in some places men waste weeks in idleness." He caught himself. "You may instruct your men now, captain."

That night I called my company together to relay the colonel's orders. "Men, we may never leave Tivorsk. You have an hour to write letters. Only a limited number can be sent by the supply section."

The colonel sent for me just before the regiment left. He asked if I had any message.

"Yes," I said, "here is a letter to my mother and this field cap for my little brother."

"I'll deliver them, captain. You have no wife?"

"Thank you, sir. No."

The regiment moved out that night, stealthily across the snow. Their white winter uniforms were lost within a few yards and I turned back to my quarters.

The men of my company were in the temporary barracks in the onion-domed church, and as I lit a cigarette, I could hear singing. I walked through the snow toward the building and stamped my felt boots in the doorway. My bearded sergeant was leading the men in a hymn before the large ikon. About midway in the chapel a small group knelt in prayer for the coming battle and for their families in the 17 republics. Their letters and small trinkets were on the way, each a cheerful message of victorious campaigns.

They stopped singing and stood at attention when they saw me.

"As you were, men," I said, "Let's sing the river song."

As the deep chested voice of my men rang out I thought, "If a Nemetski patrol hears this singing, they will return to their bivouac and swear we are all drunk. How drunk, they will find out tomorrow."

It was early yet but I expected an artillery barrage about the hour before dawn and its infantry attack. The citizens of the town had been evacuated with the regiment and would continue to the next village with their meager belongings.

The sergeant anticipated my suggestion, "Comrades," he said when the song was finished, "Let's turn in early tonight, we may as well sleep before the artillery opens up."

Before I could snuff the light and get to sleep a soft knock sounded above the crackling of the little unfrozen moisture still in the air. I put my coat on for a robe and opened the door. A lad of about 15 was standing there muffled against the wind.

"Come in," I said, "I thought all the villagers left this evening."

"I didn't go," he stammered.

"Well, it's too late now." I muttered a little angrily, "You would lose your way in the storm. Your only chance is to get all the food and water you can find and hide till our troops return."

"But that's why I stayed," he pleaded, "I can help fight. I'll fire a machine gun or even dress wounds."

"There will be no need to dress wounds, son. What's your name?"

"Nickolat, then I can help fight?" His eyes shone with fierce hatred. "The Nemetskis killed my father and mother. We lived on the collective farm at Tomer. They carried my sister away."

My anger had already given way to regret that he would have to remain with the company, for I could see that he would some day be a fine guerilla with time and training.

"Stay here tonight, then. Two can sleep warmer than one."

When we went to bed I couldn't sleep. I kept going over the defense plan. The first day we must yield only before tanks and artillery. The second day we could make a stand near the square. It was mined for tanks and fields of fire were cleared for machine guns. The third day we would snipe from housetops, cellars, and windows. We would back through the streets with our bayonets fixed. By the third night it would be over.

About 5 a.m. the first shell came over and the church rocked a little as it burst beyond the village. I woke and my men were pulling on their fur-lined snow uniforms. The relieved guard was coming in to warm by the fire. We heard a sharp whistle as the next one came over. It, too, lit beyond the village. We hoped they wouldn't find our range in the storm. After that, the dull quiet of falling snow was pierced with the shrieks of the barrage. We could tell the caliber of their guns by the different whistles. A long screaming rush of sound was ain 88. The short, high noises were the whines of small shrapnel shells.

It would be hours before enemy mortars could lob their explosives into the village. For over an hour the artillery fire overshot us with one now and then bursting on the far edge. We knew that the barrage would have to lift before the attack could start so we busied ourselves preparing ammunition. Our signal for the alert would be the lifting of the artillery and there was a certain comfort in the shrill cries of metal hurtling overhead.

They found our range just before dawn and the huge shells ripped up the ground and reduced a few houses to splinters. In a way it was good. No casualties were caused, the men were well dug in. The shell holes would provide tank barriers and machine gun nests later.

I moved around the defense positions and inspected the weapons and ammunition of my men. We had enough ammunition for a week. The guns were in good condition. Each man took his gun to bed with him to keep it from contracting in the cold. Firing kept them warm during the day.

My sergeant reported, "Sir, a boy is here and says you gave him permission to stay. He is cooking some kaptska in the commissar's oven."

"Very well, Sergeant, there are worse things than cooking kaputska."

Continuing my inspection of the fields of fire and cover for our position, I stopped to return the salute of a soldier. It seemed strange that I didn't know him. He was strangely thin for an infantryman. On second look it was the boy. He had found an extra uniform and was moving about the area unnoticed.

" You sent for me, sir?" he asked. "I have fed the men."

"Yes," I answered, "you stay with me until the battle starts, then perhaps we can decide where you should go."

I knew this didn't answer the problem but we had time to say no more for the artillery fire lifted and we could hear the rumble of tanks. My two anti-tank guns were located on small knolls outside the village and would be the first targets for enemy mortars once they gave their positions away. They held their fire till the tanks were within a hundred yards.

At that distance the first tank slowly opened like a can of ersatz fish and stalled. Armor piercing shells were bearing on the second before tracer flashes gave away the gun's position. The enemy set up a small mortar then to put the gun out of action. Nickolat and I were in a trench firing on infantry when we say one of our men snaking over the snow toward the German mortar. The Germans were watching the tank guns and this soldier got within 20 yards and threw his grenade. He was stopped by a rifle shot before he got back to his pineapple had given the an 88. The short, high noises tank. I knew it was cold when the boy was hit. His blood didn't melt any snow or oven run, it seemed to pile up under the wound in a red ice mound.

There were still three tanks and one of them made a direct hit on our right gun. The left gun set fire to one more. Then it went out as a mortar charge landed on the knoll.

Nemetski infantry was deploying as skirmishers and advancing behind the two remaining tanks. Our forces must have cut off all enemy tanks in the rear. The enemies' uniforms had been white but they were thin and blankets were wrapped around many of the soldiers. These made fine targets in the snow. We picked them off with rifle fire, saving our machine guns to lay down a grazing fire a close range.

I was shouting and firing when I felt myself pulled back into the trench. It was Nickolat. I had forgotten him and everything else and was climbing out of the trench to charge. A boy about 16 crawled out of his shell

(Please turn to page eight)

The Geyser Basins at Night

The yellow sun sinks to the ridge
And sets, a scarlet ball. hazy sky
Pours blackened mists beneath the earth's arched bridge
As darkening shadows lengthen, melt, and die.

The witch of night rides high, and from her train
A light wind filters, tingling, rimmed with frost.
A moon, the gold of Midas, shudders. Pain
Eclipses warmth; the heat of day is lost.

But on the plain, the darkest night ne'er hides
The writhing, seething columns of hot steam
That rise within deep vents in the torn sides
Of nature's stove; nor hide the geyser's gleam.

The snows of winter melt here as they fall;
The crusty cones defy the flowers of spring.
The autumn moon reflects along each hall
Of water in the mouths which never sing.

This is the land of a thousand fires,
The glory of heaven, the breath of hell,
The story of life, the aged sires
Of time, contentment's prison cell.

A swish of wings encircles the low hiss
Of steam and settles on a creaking limb;
The nightbird calls, and its clear tones dismiss
The silence. On the plain its cry sounds dim.

The wind blows ripples in the grass and flowers
That spread beyond the cauldron's smoking shafts;
Its ice obscures the gentian; all the powers
Man has cannot control its frozen drafts.

Breathe deeply air that sifts from off the peaks;
Then catch the sulfur stench that haunts the lairs
Of geysers. In the sickly smell that reeks
With brimstone feel the might which nature dares.

Touch the great peaks' slopes; the hand that's turned
Drinks in the cold of fall on fall of snow.
In blue springs place the fingers; flesh is burned
With searing, scalding force from heat below.

For this is the land of a thousand fires,
The glory of heaven, the breath of hell,
Which man may see if he desires;
Where nature and the north wind dwell.

Out on the field the mystic smokes ascend;
A thousand pipes shoot forth their steaming trails.
They twist, and then on windy nights, they bend
Their forms to match the coldness and the gales.

They dance with eerie rhythm; in their white
And formless shapes the ghosts of gods appear
Whose people where the Red Men. In the light
Of myth they dwell and dance here year on year

Their cries moan through the wind, their drumbeats come
From deep within the earth; their essence shrouds
The moon their father's face; meanwhile their numb
And ghastly forms dissolve among the clouds.

The wind grows soft, and in the moonlight pale
The marble columns lift their heights to stars.
The scattered shafts recall the Roman tale
Of some colossal ruin meant for Mars.

For this is the land of a thousand fires,
The glory of heaven, the breath of hell,
Where the past wipes off it dust-cloaked lyres
And sings of the days she remembers well.

Through hours of the night, nights of the year, years
Of the centuries, the steam spurts forth and climbs the sky
The minutes pass and grow; each day, night rears
Its hood across the landscape but to die.

Man sees today and passes to his bed;
The moon creeps up and lights the blackened scene.
Tomorrow someone else will view the red
Of sunset and the steam-field's gloomy mien.

The roads of mankind cross the plains
Like ribbons. In their blatant paths the trees
Bow down and fall. The light of nature wanes,
As mountains yield to man their hidden keys.

Once, before these smokes, the Red Men's prayers
Rose to their gods. Ere that, the flowers and birds
And animals claimed all the land as theirs;
Their age outlives the wisest spoken words.

This, the land of a thousand fires,
The glory of heaven, the breath of hell,
Was not made for man, but to house the choirs
Of the rocks' old age in their mountain cell.

Ross Yates