

# The Defense of Tivorsk . . . .

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hole and ran toward a tank. He was hit about midway but kept going to fall with his grenade in the track mechanism of the leading one. It blew up in front of the next one.

The Germans began digging temporary shelters in the afternoon when they saw they couldn't reach any of the village buildings. We tried to charge once more but their force of numbers drove us back with a heavy loss. We waited in fireless trenches for morning of the second day.

That day seemed to drag on eternally. The blizzard became more brutal but this was harder on the enemy than our remaining dozen men. There was heavy mortar fire aimed at our trenches but little activity with rifles. We replied to their fire with mortars and grenades.

The second night I posted observers and patrols and stayed awake so the men could huddle in the warmth of their own bodies for a few minutes rest between watches. The trenches were partially roofed and offered protection from the wind and most of the snow but we could have no fires to offer targets for enemy mortars.

Nickolat and I sat and smoked. "I wish we could have a fire," he ventured. "Did you ever watch the wood in a fire, how it crackles and pieces drop off to burn in swift flame." He stirred and looked at the sleeping men, huddled with exhaustion and cold.

"Men's lives in battle are like sticks on the fire." He looked at me for an answer but I smoked on.

"Sometimes if the fire burns long enough, all the wood is turned to ashes. But if something puts the fire out, only the outside of the sticks are burned. The next layer is charred a little but the inside is new wood yet, perhaps hardened by the fire but still healthy wood."

I asked, "Who decides which part of the wood will be on the outside, or wounded wood, or inside wood? Is it the woodchopper?"

One of the men had wakened. "Perhaps, young comrade, it is the wood cutter, then?" he said.

"No, because the axeman just splits the log into sections by chance," Nickolat said. "He doesn't care which wood is outside, his axe only follows the grain. Some wood is always outside and if something puts the fire out. . . ."

"May be the colonel was the wood cutter," I said. "He didn't plan for us to be the outside wood, it was the way the grain turned."

"But, Captain," Nickolat smiled, "Maybe something will put the fire out, then only those men out there who threw grenades will be outside wood."

"Who told you this about the wood?" I asked.

"No one, Captain, I saw it in the fire as I cooked the kaput-ska."

We tried to sleep then. The morning of the third day began with a new and desperate charge by the Germans. They had been cold during the night, for they could have no fires either. We saw bodies piled up without red ice on the snow and Nickolat said, "Maybe our winter will help put the fire out."

It was about noon when a mortar dropped a shell near our trench and a piece of fragmentation hit my neck. At first I didn't feel anything but my chest was wet and sticky. I looked down and at the same time felt a cold sharp stabbing in my throat. My blood was pumping out fast and Nickolat helped me lie down. First he found the pressure point and pressed it

with his fingers till the stream was only a slow red trickle.

I tried to talk to him with my eyes but he said, "Be quiet, you are only charred wood now."

I didn't remember anything till that night when I woke with a throbbing in my neck that seemed to shake my whole body. Nickolat was leaning over me with a clean bandage and had my head propped up with the uniform of a soldier for whom it was too late to put out the fire.

"Where did you learn to nurse, boy?" I asked.

His face had an old and tired look as he answered, "The Nemet-skis burned our village and the farm. They hung some of the men and carried the women away so those of us who escaped had to come back at night and help where we could."

"For a while, perhaps, you have saved my life, thank you and remember, men like you will rebuild Tomer and Tivorsk some day. Now, have the ranking non come report."

After a little while a young corporal crawled up and saluted.

My return was feeble, "How is our position?"

"We are six men and are holding them off by sniping. They must think there are many more of us because they do not at-

tack. The third day is past."

"Very well, Corporal, have your men come here one at a time for rest and instruction. Continue to fire. It may be cold enough tonight to put out the fire." The corporal did not understand this last.

The men came to the trench which had become base hospital and command post. Nickolat had risked a fire but the snow was too thick for enemy observation.

"Nickolat," I asked, "Hand me my log book." I wrote shakily the words, "Mission accomplished," and the date.

One man who came for instructions was a giant Magyar who had worked in the steel mills. "You would like to go home in a few days?" I asked.

"Yes, Captain, but this is a strange time for joking."

"No, the Nemet-ski does not know our number. He too, is tired and cold, cold enough so that he may want to run to keep warm. Here is the plan." I repeated what I had told the rest.

"First line up all the mortars and pile shells beside them. Then build fires in the stoves of all the houses on the enemy edge of the village. The snow is too thick for them to see the smoke. When midnight begins the morning of the fourth day, the two smallest men will open fire with machine guns. They will first remove the tracers from the belts so the enemy cannot see their position. There will be no need

for accuracy. The other two men. . . ." I coughed and my throat started to bleed again.

Nickolat found the place again above my collar bone and it stopped.

"The other two men will have bugles and they will fire the mortars as fast as they can run from one to another, blowing bugles as loudly as possible. One more man will bring ammunition up and stand by as a replacement for any post."

"What will be my mission, sir?"

"You are the strongest. You will take a sack full of rifle cartridges and run from house to house dropping a handful in each stove." I began to slip from consciousness.

It was day light when I awoke again. Nickolat and one of the men were sitting near the fire. "He's awake now." I hear him say.

The man came over. "Captain, the enemy has been met and routed. We followed your orders and they must have thought our regiment had returned, for they retreated in undignified haste."

"You are wounded?" I asked. "Only in the arm, sir, the others are dead. The enemy did not flee without firing heavily on our position. It was impossible to be where bullets were not flying."

"Where was Nickolat?"

"When the man with the bag of ammunition got hit, he ran out and finished loading the

stoves. The din was terrific, sir!"

Nickolat smiled wearily, "After they had started to run, one of our planes flew over and strafed them. When they thought we had air support, too, they even dropped their guns to escape. The plane dropped this, it's for you."

I unrolled the small yellow sheet and began to make out the cryptogram. "If any of Weapons Co. 1st Bn. remain in Tivorsk, Greeting. Your regiment is returning by direct route, mission accomplished. Stand by to receive prisoners." It was authorized by the field commander in the East.

Nickolat lurched forward, caught himself for a moment and then rolled on his back. I saw the red stain under him arm. The other soldier looked a minute and turned away. "I didn't know he was hit, Captain. He has been so quiet. He was like a son to me."

My wound was not hurting any more then but I knew that the cold was not good for it. "Tell the Colonel we waited as long as we could, comrade," I said.

Looking toward the strewn remains of the enemy attack where snow drifted implacably over guns and bodies, I thought how soon it would all be level out there again. I looked at the code message again, it didn't say so, but surely the regimental chaplain would be returning with his outfit . . . to Tivorsk.

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