

YOUNG HICKORY

A WWII Novel

STEVEN F. UNDERWOOD

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OREGON

YOUNG HICKORY

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*This book is dedicated to the soldiers of the 30th Division,
and to its successor, the men and women of the
30th Armored Brigade Combat Team.*

Principal Characters

**Starred characters are real members of the 30th Division, 1944-45.
Many of these will be identified in the Endnotes section of the book.*

Jim Farrell, “Young Hickory”; Irene and Melvin Farrell, parents;
Charlie Farrell, brother
Ben Stein and Lester Stone, E Company, 120th Regiment, 30th Division
Dave Harris, I&R Platoon
Lille Gèrard, Belgian, Jim’s great love
Henri Panis, Belgian, World War I veteran, friend of Lille’s
Madame Dubray, grandmother to Étienne Dubray
Étienne Dubray, young grandson of Madame Dubray
Joshua Drummond, African-American member of the Red Ball Express,
later replacement in Patton’s 3rd Army

E Company, 120th Regiment, 30th Division

Gregson
Smitty
Lieutenant Pierce
Sergeant Baloski
Crittenden
Sean O’Herlihy
Barsky
Phil Mason
Corporal Ritchie
Carson, medic

Members of 120th Regiment (or units attached to the 120th)

*Colonel Hammond Birks
*Lieutenant Colonel Eads Hardaway
*Lieutenant Ralph Kerley
*Sergeant Whitsell
*Lieutenant Robert Weiss, Forward Observer, 230th Field Artillery.
*Sergeant Sasser, *Sergeant Corn, *Corporal Garrott, *Private Ionucci
(all members of Weiss’s detachment)

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*Captain Bryn

*Lieutenant Haver

*Lieutenant Hume

Hanson, Fogarty, Wilcox, Parrington, Reichardt, Barbee

*Sergeant (Warrant Officer) James Lyles

*Private (later Sergeant) Francis (Frank) Currey, K Company, 120th

Private Caron, K Company, 120th

*Colonel Branner Purdue

*Lieutenant Colonel Danridge

*Lieutenant Colonel Ward

Lieutenant Masters

Members of 30th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop

Ochiltree

Lieutenant Billings

Oakley

*Sergeant Marion Sanford

Members of 105 Medical Hospital Battalion

Lieutenant Patrick, nurse

Dr. O'Brian

Lieutenant Mary Caroll

Dr. Lentz

Members of the 120th Regiment-Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon

Lieutenant Calhoun

Sergeant Patterson

Monson, Driscoll, Dowd, Garcia, Stakowski (Stak), Coolidge, Alferes (Al),
Zilinek (Z), Ewan, Martinelli, McLaughlin, Lawrence, Tobin, Walwitz (Wally),
Stan Metzger, Bill Harmon

Members of 291st Combat Engineers

Smith and Jones

Members of 119th Regiment

*Major (later Colonel) Robert Herlong

Private Ferris

Member of 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion

*Robert Mearig

STEVEN F. UNDERWOOD

Members of 105th Engineer Battalion, 30th Division

*Lieutenant Everette Groe

Sergeant Saylor

Sergeant McDuffie

Member B Company, 1st Battalion, 116th Regiment, 29th Division

Joe Kazmarek

Miscellaneous

Hans Bock, German Prisoner-of-War

Mattias Youngermann, Sexton, Magdeburg Cathedral

Lieutenant Marion, American pilot, 9th Air Force

Lemaire Family, citizens of Faymonville

General Omar Bradley, 1st Army

General Bernard Montgomery, British/Commonwealth Army

General George Patton, 3rd Army

General William Simpson, 9th Army

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Prologue

Happy Birthday to You

Happy Birthday to You

Happy Ninety-Third Birthday, Dear Great-Grandpa

Happy Birthday to You

HIS GREAT-GRANDSON, Jimmy, brought in the cake with a single candle on it. He placed it on the table in front of the old man. The birthday “boy” blew out the candle. He smiled and said, “At least you didn’t put *all* the candles on the cake, and make me blow them out with my last breath.” His children, grandchildren, and great-grandchild all laughed. Jimmy climbed up in his great-granddad’s lap. Marie, his mother, cut a slice of the pound cake, smothered with lemon crème.

“Jimmy, get up off your great-granddad’s lap and let him eat.” The seven-year old slid down to the floor, taking the TV remote with him. He flipped through the channels. “This is boring, Great Pa, I wanna watch ‘Teen Titans,’ but it’s not on any of your channels. Why do you only have ten channels?”

Great Pa pointed up at the portrait of the couple over the fireplace. “That’s ten times more than when your great-grandma and me first moved here. Isn’t that enough? It is for me.”

Jimmy stamped his feet, and pouted, “But I wanna watch ‘Teen Titans’...or something!”

His mother picked him up and tried to change the subject. “Forget the cartoons, your Great Pa can tell you much better stories.” She stared at the portrait. “Why don’t you tell him how you met Great-Grandma? I don’t think you’ve ever told him that story.”

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His grandson, Dave, spoke: “Yes, I haven’t heard it since Grandma passed away in...gosh, it’s been nearly ten years!

Great Pa stroked his chin. “Ah, well *that* is a story. It was in Nineteen Forty-Five...” He paused. The television news was showing a story about National Guardsmen in Iraq. Jim Farrell’s eyes moved to another photograph on the mantle. It featured a young man. His head was turned toward the camera, and on his left shoulder sleeve was a patch of red and blue with the letter O and an H inside it. And in the middle of the H were three Xs.

He put his cake plate down and gazed at the faces of his entire family for a moment. *Perhaps it was time for a different story. One most of them had never heard. I might not have another chance.*

“Actually, it began in July of 1944...”

Chapter One

RUNNER

JIM LISTENED INTENTLY to the speaker, not willing to let go of the opportunity to start a friendship with his new comrade.

Lester Stone began, “They’re falling short, they’re falling short!”

It was the fourth time Stone had told the young replacement this story of the Air Force’s horrible mistake in the two short days he’d been with the regiment. But he didn’t mind. Lester Stone possessed the bushiest eyebrows Jim had ever seen, and was the only soldier who had spoken more than ten words to him since he joined his new unit. Lester gazed up towards the sky, as if the bombing would happen again.

“Bomb after bomb, on and on, three hundred killed, God knows how many more wounded. And all because of our Air Force, our own god-damned Air Force.” He lowered his head to stare right into the eyes of his audience. “What did you say your name was?”

“It’s Jim, Jim Farrell. You know, from Virginia.”

“Yeah, yeah, the youngster from Lynchburg.”

Jim corrected Lester again. “Altavista.”

Lester smiled. “Right, Altavista. Did I tell you I’ve been through there several times?”

“Yes sir, you did. Remember, I said I was surprised. I never expected

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to meet someone who had been through such a small town.” Lester was like a lot of men his father knew. They would gather at the barber shop or gas station and tell stories. Each person would try to outdo the other. Only those were fish stories, these carried a different kind of message.

Corporal Stone continued, “Yeah, well you could have met a bunch of us who knew that town a couple of weeks ago. A lot of guys in the 120th were from North Carolina, Reidsville, Greensboro, even Wilmington.” He slumped back into the small foxhole and stared off toward the south where the Germans still held Tessy-sur-Vire. “Not many anymore, not many anymore.”

That caused the third member in their tiny protected enclosure to groan. Private Ben Stein pushed back his helmet that had covered his eyes while Stone told his story. It revealed a round face with a sharp nose, a thick moustache and a scraggly beard.

“Here we go. How many times have I heard this? How many times is Young Hickory here going to hear it?” Ben’s voice softened almost to a whisper, “Let it go, Les.”

While Stein talked to Les, Jim stood up, stretching his long legs on a lanky frame. Ben immediately reached out to grab him. “Get down, you damned fool! We’re not that far from the Kraut’s lines. And if they shoot at you, they just might accidentally hit me.”

Jim plopped down closer to Stein. “Were you there, Stein?”

Stein turned slightly, taking a peek towards the south. “Yeah, I was there, only I’m trying to forget it, unlike your Dixie cousin,” dropping his M-1 down slightly in the direction of Stone. It was the first time he had spoken directly to Farrell and the young replacement decided to pursue the opening.

“Was the bombing like Stone said?”

Stein settled back down in the pit. He put his hand behind his helmet, “Shit, yeah it was that bad. As bad as anything since I came across Omaha. Yeah, I saw it, legs, arms, heads. God, what a mess. There’s nobody who’s going to forget that day.”

As part of the Cobra attack, General Bradley had ordered his army to break the stand-off in Normandy. The 9th Air Force bombed the stale-

mated lines just south of Saint-Lô. It began well. American troops could see German tanks blow up and hear the screams of the Nazi troops. But soon the dust blown up by the bombs covered the battlefield. The succeeding waves of American planes mistakenly dropped their bombs on their own lines.

It resulted in hundreds of casualties along the front, particularly in the 30th Division, nicknamed the Old Hickory Division. The entire unit was stunned. Amazingly, they still moved forward but the short fall, and the subsequent shock, had allowed the Germans to recover.¹

The need for more manpower led to a change in James Farrell's orders. He left the replacement depot near the Normandy beaches, and joined the division three days after the misguided bombs decimated the 30th Division. He leaned back in the small slit trench and quietly said to Stein, "I would have beaten you to the beaches if everything had gone right."

Stein gave Jim a puzzled look. "What do you mean? What the hell do you mean? I'm talking about July after Saint-Lô. What are you talking about?"

"I was supposed to be in the 29th, the Blue-Grays. I was supposed to go off on June 6th with my home division, even before you guys." Jim wasn't sure whether he should go on. He decided it was time to share his guilt. "I broke both arms going off the side of the gunwales of the Higgins boat on a practice run before D-Day." He spit out his last sentence, "I was in a damned hospital rather than joining my buddies crossing Omaha Beach."

The trio turned quiet for a moment. Lester snapped the silence with a terse statement. "It's a good thing you did, 29th got blown away that day."

Jim shook his head, "I don't know, I don't know. I've been wondering ever since I got back in action."

Stein squinted his eyes and shook his finger at Jim. "Dammit, Young Hickory, don't be in such a rush to get yourself killed. Death'll come for you when it's ready, whether it's June 6th or August 6th."

Jim stared back. "It's Jim. My name is Jim Farrell."

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Stone chuckled. “Guess you heard that, Stein. He don’t like that nickname you gave him, though I must admit it fits.” He stared at the whiskerless novice. “You don’t look like you’re more than sixteen.”

“Nineteen,” Farrell said. He shifted uncomfortably in the foxhole as if looking for someone to come up and grab him. He had just admitted something he hadn’t told a soul since he left Virginia. Jim forged a birth certificate and enlisted when he was barely seventeen. Like many of his friends, he’d wanted to join up as soon as the news broke on Pearl Harbor, but didn’t try until his father passed away the next year. A few weeks after the funeral Jim conned his barely literate mother into getting his birth certificate changed, sending her oldest son off to fight in the war.

Athletic and fast as lightning, he quickly impressed the regional National Guard officer enough to ignore his youthful face. It wouldn’t show a decent whisker until Jim was in England training for the D-Day invasion. The 116th regiment was full of Virginians, and Jim felt at home. Then came the accident, he had jumped out of the landing boat too soon. He broke his right arm immediately, then fractured his left arm slamming up against the boat as he tried desperately to free himself from the heavy equipment sinking to the bottom of the English Channel.

After his convalescence, Jim had worked hard to get back to the 29th. He was ready to go until the tragedy of the American bombing of their own troops led to a search for replacements, and his arrival in the 30th.

Les Stone interrupted his silent reminisces. “And you know the real cropper. Nobody knows what happened to us. All because of that goddamned general.”

Jim peered over at Stone. “What the hell are you talking about, old man?” Though Stone was barely 25, every other soldier looked like an old man to the newest addition to their platoon.

“The three-star general who got splattered all over the place. There wasn’t enough to even scrape up.” Les looked over at Stein. “You see what I mean? They didn’t even tell our own troops. Goddamned Army, not even in the *Stars and Stripes*.”

Jim interrupted. “No, it was in the news, I just don’t remember about a general.”

Stein's helmet slipped back over his eyes. "Oh yeah, they'll give you all the dope on privates and corporals dying, but not a word on losing a three star. Don't want to alarm the folks back home."

Stone punctuated the conversation again. "Goddamned army."

Their talk ended when mortars from the German lines fell nearby. Splintered wood and shattered rocks peppered them, but the Kraut's were just doing what they called "nuisance shooting", seeing if the Americans would reveal their positions. After about five or six shells the bombs stopped. A moment or two later Stein looked over the rim of their little bombshell crater. "You know, Stone, the last time they did this, it was to cover their asses pulling out. Up at Vire, you remember?"

Stone peeked at the German lines. "Maybe, but I wouldn't count on it just yet." A groan came from the foxhole to their right. Stein immediately called out. "What the hell is happening over there?"

"It's Smitty." stated a disembodied voice. "He got a couple of splinters from that little barrage and he's milkin' it for all it's worth."

"Shut your fucking trap, Gregson." Smitty groaned again, "the bastard got me in the groin."

Stein rolled over to the wounded man's position. He peered down before saying, "Well, then Smitty, since you ain't got nothing down there, you got nothing to worry about."

"Fuck you, Stein, your old lady'll find out what I got down there when I get home. This is my ticket, boys"

Gregson spoke up again, "Bullshit, Smitty, I'm telling you it's nothing more than a scratch."

Lieutenant Pierce, the leader of the third platoon, Easy Company, scurried towards them. He ran low to the ground in a crouched position. In the twilight he looked like a scurrying crab. "Who's hurt?"

Stein rose up slightly on one elbow, "It's Smitty, Sir."

Pierce reached the foxhole and rolled in. "How bad is it?"

"Pretty bad, sir." said Smith and then groaned again.

Pierce took a quick look, "You're hardly bleeding. I'll get a medic up here, but you stay in that hole. The regiment is expecting an attack later tonight, and I'm going to need everybody I can get." Pierce rose

up far enough to address most of the platoon. There were about twenty-six survivors from the bombing, and the following attack that opened up a hole for the 2nd Armored. It had worked, even though the men of the 30th could not see it. The front was on the verge of breaking wide open, and armored columns were racing toward Avranches and the Brittany Peninsula. Pierce called out. "I need a runner."

No one answered.

Pierce spoke again, "The radio got hit by a mortar fragment and the phone line is cut. I need somebody to go back to HQ for supplies and set up artillery coordinates."

Still, no one answered.

Pierce was not well respected by the platoon. He was a National Guard man who had transferred in just after D-Day. Stone told Jim that Pierce had been a major in the 35th Division, but had been busted down to lieutenant because of his inability to make tough decisions. The silence seemed to last for hours, but it was only a few seconds when a quiet voice volunteered.

"I'll go, sir." It was Farrell.

Stone moved over to his foxhole companion and whispered, "Are you crazy? It's twilight, your shadow will stand out like a six-foot lightnin' bug to the German snipers. Are you that determined to get yourself shot?"

Farrell stared at Stone. "I'm fast, I'm not much of a shot, and I can't throw a grenade very far, but I can run."

Lieutenant Pierce had rolled over to their foxhole. "Who said that?"

"I did, sir."

Pierce looked Jim up and down. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Farrell, sir. I came in four days ago. I can get up and back fast."

The lieutenant thought for a moment, "Farrell, Farrell, oh yeah the 29th reject."

Jim spoke brusquely, "I wasn't a reject, sir. I was injured. My arms," lifting up both toward the sky, "but I can run, I promise."

"Yeah, yeah, kid, I remember, I was just ribbin' you. Alright, you're my runner." The officer took out a pen and a small flashlight. He began

to write on a pad. “Ok, get this back to battalion HQ as fast as you can. Tell them if they want us to hold this sector, I need some ammo, and the division artillery to put some fire on that grove where the mortars came from.”

Jim glanced across the battlefield. Pierce asked, “About how far do you think that grove is, Private?”

Jim peered through the looming darkness. “I’d say about 500 yards, sir.”

“I would have guessed 600, but close enough. Take a look around for some reference points and get ready to go.”

Jim sighted a recently destroyed German panzer just about halfway to the grove. It was still glowing. If it didn’t rain tonight, that panzer would stand out enough for him to see it from a mile away. It would be his beacon to follow for his return. The young Virginian lived far out in the country. The family rarely had access to a car. They walked everywhere. Jim’s father had taught him how to identify landmarks to find his way home on the darkest night. To Jim, the embers of the burning panzer was like a lighthouse.

“Okay, Farrell, here’s the note, get ready to go.” Jim took one last look at the grove and shook hands with Stone.

Stone shook his head at what he saw as a suicide mission and gave him a boost out of the foxhole.

Jim started across the landscape with the lieutenant throwing out one last order as he began to run. “And tell them I need another radio, not a piece of crap like the last one they sent us.”

Jim trotted towards the nearest tree, but he suddenly had a notion that the lone tree might attract attention from the Germans. He zigged and zagged away from the tree. Just as he hit a remnant of a small wall, flames shot up to his left, directly in front of the tree. His premonition had been correct. Lowering his body to make as small a target as he could, Farrell danced away from machine gun tracers and scrambled on. Ten minutes later he came to the battalion headquarters. He told the sentry he had an important note from Easy Company. The sentry simply shrugged and waved him in.

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A broad-shouldered lieutenant met him. "Who are you?"

"Private Farrell, Easy Company," as he gave the officer a cursory salute. "I have a message from my platoon."

The lieutenant looked at the message. "This says 0710, how far south is the platoon?"

"I'd say a little over two miles, sir."

The incredulous officer said, "You made it up here in fifteen minutes?"

Farrell was worried he was going to be reprimanded. "I'm sorry sir, I had to stop a couple of times because of machine gun fire."

The lieutenant smiled, and turned to the officer sitting at a big oak desk splintered by recent gun fire. "I think we've found a runner, Colonel."

Lieutenant Colonel Eads Hardaway, the 2nd Battalion commander, peered up from his desk. "Come here, soldier. Let me see what you got."

Farrell handed the scratch paper to the commanding officer. Colonel Hardaway looked at the scrawl. "So, your commander wants me to blast a little grove of trees because he thinks it's full of Germans. What did you see, Private?"

Jim rose to his full height. "Sir, I don't know if it's full of Germans, but it definitely has mortars, and I had to dodge at least one machine gun, maybe two as I made my way back to here."

Hardaway sat back in a wrought iron chair. "Interesting." He looked over at his aide, "Not only can he run, he looks like he's got some observation skills. What's your name, son?"

"Farrell, sir, James Farrell."

"Farrell, how would you like to be up here at headquarters? I need someone who can slip around enemy lines and get back here real fast. What do you think?"

"I don't know, sir. I just joined the regiment a few days ago. I haven't really gotten a chance to settle in."

The colonel leaned forward again. "That might be better. I tell you what, take these instructions back to your lieutenant. Think it over, and if you think you'd like to be a runner for the battalion, come back up here tomorrow. I think I can use you."

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

Farrell slipped out. He picked up a handie-talkie for the lieutenant and thought about whether he would take the Colonel up on his suggestion. He really wasn't a part of his new platoon. He had only made one friend, and that was a tentative one, Lester Stone, based on geography as much as really getting to know him. His thoughts were interrupted by a salvo that flashed over his head. A volley of three from the 105s had caused the sound. It was followed by another, and before Farrell had gone five more steps, another. He set off in a fast trot now. Jim was convinced that these were in response to the lieutenant's request and he wanted to see the results.

He still zig-zagged back to the lines, but only saw one brief machine gun burst from the German lines on his return. The eight o'clock sky displayed the briefest of red sunsets on this last day of July. When he got back, Lieutenant Pierce and the rest of the unit were all facing south. Farrell thought, it was a good thing he wasn't a Kraut with a pistol machine gun or they'd all be dead. Jim cleared his throat, "Sir, here's your new handie-talkie."

"That was quick, geez, Farrell did you fly?"

"No, sir, but I wanted to get back to see what happened."

"Well," said a sergeant Jim didn't know, "you missed the big fireworks. The artillery plastered the shit out of the Germans. We saw at least two tanks blow up and an APC burning."

"God bless, the artillery," said another soldier unknown to Farrell, "The 30th's got the best blasters in the entire army."

Farrell settled in next to Stone and Stein. Stone said, "There's still a lot of Tar Heel boys in the artillery battalion, Virginie. Pretty damn good shots, still wanna go back to the 29th, Young Hickory?"

Jim gave a slight smile. "Maybe, plus I got a job offer from headquarters. They want to make me runner."

Stein spoke up. "Oh, you won't be a runner if you join HQ. You'll be a communications orderly, might even get an extra dollar a week."

"Really?" questioned Jim.

Lester Stone spoke up, "He's pulling your leg, Farrell. There ain't no such thing, but I wanna know what made you so fast?"

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Jim gave just a slight smile, leaned back against the wall of the small entrenchment. “It was because of my old man.”

Stein interjected, “I bet he beat you, my father beat me, but all I did was get slower.”

“No, he didn’t beat me. My dad was a pretty gentle man and a decent farmer, but he was a lousy mechanic. We had an old Ford tractor and a Model-T for transportation, neither one stayed working for any real amount of time. When the Depression hit we couldn’t get parts unless we sold some produce, and that got harder and harder. So, when we came up short, or Mama or Daddy needed medicine or some milk, they’d send me to Altavista.”

Stone said, “How did that help you get fast?”

“Uh, I said I was from Altavista. Actually, our farm was closer to Gretna.”

Stone whistled. “Whoa, that’s a good distance.”

“We were on the Campbell County side. It was about eight miles, but that wasn’t the only reason I got fast. About half-way between home and town was an old holler, full of sycamores and hickories. If I got there after twilight, it was spooky, real spooky. I would fly through that place and never look back. That’s really how I got fast.”

“Sounds like a regular Sleepy Hollow,” Stein said.

“Yeah, headless horseman and all,” Stone added. “But see, you were destined to be in a division called the Old Hickory, they’re part of your reason for running.”

Jim smiled. “I don’t know about headless horsemen, but yeah, there was one old hickory tree just at the end of the hollow. When I passed it, I could look up the valley and see the lights of our house and our next-door neighbors, the Rollins. I knew I could get to my house unless the devil himself was following me.”

Lieutenant Pierce walked over, interrupting their conversation, “You guys better get some sleep. We’re going into those woods at first light, or what’s left of them. The 113th really plastered them. By the way, Colonel Hardaway said to tell you ‘nice work’, Farrell.”

“Thank you, sir. Uh, who’s the 113th.”

Stein chuckled and Stone muttered ‘rookie’ as Pierce spoke to Jim,

“It’s our artillery unit ya skinny hillbilly. You better learn who’s in this division if you’re gonna be a runner.”

Farrell’s eyebrow rose slightly. He was surprised his possible “promotion” had reached the lieutenant’s ears.

The rest of the night passed with little noise other than Smitty’s occasional moan followed by Gregson’s call to “shut the fuck up, Smitty, you ain’t going home.” Farrell drifted off to sleep. Tired by his day’s adventures, his attempt to sleep was intermittently punctuated by an uneasy feeling. He might have been accepted by his platoon at the same time he had an opportunity to move to another unit. About 4:00 a.m., he fell into a deeper sleep that ended an hour later when he heard Sergeant Baloski, a large, powerful man, and the second squad commander, called the men to rouse. “Grab a K-ration and check your M-1s and ammo packs. We’re moving out at 0600.”

Stein called over to Gregson, “You got that BAR set up?” Gregson gave a thumbs up. Stein continued, “Wonder if they’re going to hit the woods again before we go?”

“Why?” Stone asked, “You think there’s that many left?”

Stein took another peek towards the woods. “Maybe not, but it’d make me feel better.” On call the company’s mortars opened up. “Mortars,” he said, “pea gun mortars,” and spit down, just missing Farrell’s boot. Farrell scowled. Stein smiled. “Good thing you got them quick feet, Hick. I’d hate for you to have to shine your shoes before you move up in rank.”

Jim considered what to say, but Pierce called for them to move out before he came up with a snappy retort. The entire company began to move through a light fog and a smoky haze that came from the breeze blowing the mortar’s firings back toward the American lines. There were no shots fired as they moved quickly. Once again, Jim’s speed led him to reach the trees before anyone else. There was a strange, sweetly sick odor hanging in the air. He came upon a dead German half hanging out of a wrecked personnel carrier.

Stein came up behind him, “Hell, it’s true.”

“What’s true?” Jim asked.

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“Look at his collar, it’s SS. We’d heard we were up against the 2nd SS Panzers, and there’s the proof. If it makes you feel any better, Hick, you were up against Hitler’s first string.”

Jim shook his head. “Nope, I don’t feel any better. I just want to kill them before they kill me.”

“A sound plan, Farrell.” Stone said, who had walked up behind the first two men in the grove. “You should follow it all the way to Berlin.”

About that time a pistol machine gun opened up. It was far away but it sent everybody scattering. A second later Pierce called out. “Anybody hurt?”

Gregson started laughing. “Yeah, Smitty got it again. I think it’s real this time, he ain’t groaning.”

Smitty let out a string of curse words that ended with, “they got me in the goddamn shoulder, the same one I told you about last night.” Gregson started to roll over towards him when another spit of machine gun fire plowed up ground just to the left of the two of them.

Sergeant Baloski crawled over to the lieutenant, “What the hell is that guy trying to do with that little spitter? It ain’t got the range to do anything other than scare us.”

“Maybe that’s it. Maybe it’s just to keep our heads down while they get the hell out of here.” He then shouted. “Anybody see where that’s coming from?”

Jim was about fifteen feet to the right of the lieutenant. He called out, “I think it’s up in that big tree about 200 yards to our right.”

Pierce took a quick look. “Crittenden, you think you can use that grenade popper of yours to get our friend moving.”

“Geez, Lieutenant, that’s pretty far. I don’t think I can drop it down on top of him.”

“I said I want to get him moving. Let’s see if Farrell is right before we send in a Typhoon strike.” Several of the platoon chuckled at the reference to the plane the Germans called the *Jabo*. It was better known for taking out tanks than a lone gunman. Pierce continued. “Okay, men, look sharp. Crittenden, drop that shot as close as you can to that big tree.”

Crittenden aimed his grenade launcher and sent a shot that splintered a couple of shrubs just short of the larger tree. A few seconds later two Germans dropped out of the branches, and were quickly mowed down by rifle and machine gun fire.

Stone turned to Jim. “Well, son, not only can you run, you got pretty damn good eyes.”

Jim thought to himself, *It’s a good thing I can run and see well, because I can’t shoot worth a damn.* He estimated the two shots he’d fired had missed the sniper by a dozen yards. Quietly, the platoon moved on up. Everyone was alert but there was no more firing. The next moment they heard the unmistakable sound of a Sherman tank moving up behind them. The tank stopped long enough to open up a turret. A sergeant popped out.

“Any you guys know where Argentan is? We’re a replacement tank and we got lost moving up.”

“Christ.” The Lieutenant said. “You are lost! We’re twenty kilometers from Argentan.” Pierce pulled out a map and told the sergeant to come down out of his tank. He pointed out the roads he should take, making a comment on whether certain roads might still have German rearguards. In a few minutes, the sergeant climbed back in, gave them a wave, and headed southwest across the countryside. Pierce pulled in the platoon from their scattered positions. “Gentlemen, the Germans are on the run. Patton has the 3rd Army racing down towards Brittany. We’ll move down this ways a bit, but I think we’re through seeing the Boche for a while. I wouldn’t be surprised to be getting orders to pack it in before too long.”

The announcement was met by quiet until Smitty broke everyone up calling out, “Hell, I was just ready to go after Hitler, busted shoulder and all, I but now I’ll never get to Berlin before old Guts and Glory. Yep, our guts and....” Everybody joined in, “...his glory.”

Stein spoke to Sergeant Baloski. “So, Patton’s back in good graces with the Ike and Bradley.”

Baloski gave a nod and added, “Yeah, with a new army to boot. I wonder if that would have happened if that three-star we saw go up in smoke outside of Saint-Lô would have lived?”

YOUNG HICKORY

Stein pulled back. "Come on, Sarge, Patton ain't that diabolical, is he?"

Baloski grinned. "I don't know, I'm just wondering."

About an hour later the orders came. "It's official," said Pierce, "1st Infantry will be moving into our positions tomorrow and we're getting to move back to the rear." This time a small cheer broke out among survivors of what they hoped would be the most rugged fighting the 30th Division would ever see.

Smitty shouted out the biggest cheer when he got into an ambulance while the rest of the men began packing up to walk back from the front. "See you guys at home."

"You'll be back by September, that ain't no goin' home wound." Gregson hollered.

Smitty called back. "We'll see, we'll see. I got plans, Reggie boy." He hollered something else as the ambulance moved away, but no one could make it out.

Chapter Two

ROOKIES

HOURS LATER, the platoon moved into a bivouac several miles from the front. By the next day, hot showers and hot food were available. It made for a more palatable experience. A corporal from the supply company came by. “Listen up you guys, Edward G. Robinson is coming to visit, so the uppity ups want you all to try to look like real soldiers, maybe even shave.”

Stein muttered. “I wouldn’t even shave for my mother. Why should I shave for some movie star that won’t know me from Adam’s house cat?” But most of the platoon was more excited, and began trying out imitations of Robinson’s Public Enemy persona on anybody who would listen. Farrell, however, held back. He still was mulling over the possibility of a transfer to the battalion commander’s staff when Pierce showed up with three new men.

Pierce called out. “Farrell, I thought it might be worthwhile if you kind of gave these new guys the lowdown before they move into the outfit. I figured you might have some ideas about blending in.”

Jim was impressed the lieutenant would give him such an assignment. Though he wondered if it was because he was the most inexperienced of the remaining forces. Or was the lieutenant sending a back handed

message that he'd like Farrell to stay with the unit? In any case, he greeted the three newcomers with as much of a grin as he could muster. "Welcome to the 120th."

The tallest of the new men spoke up first. "My name is O'Herlihy, Sean O'Herlihy" the red-haired freckled face man said, who couldn't have been more Irish. "I'm from Chicago."

The second member, a broad-shouldered black-haired guy who barely looked Jim's way "Barsky," and left it at that.

Farrell tried to engage him in conversation by asking the usual question, "Where ya from?"

"Iowa," was the quick reply followed by uneasy silence

The final member of the new recruits was the shortest of the three and at least half a foot shorter than Jim. He held out his hand to shake, "I'm Mason, Phil Mason and I'm glad to be here."

"Oh, why's that?" Jim asked.

"I'm from Gastonia. It's in North Carolina. I've been angling to get in this regiment since I got off the boat in Normandy ten days ago. I can't believe my good luck. I got some friends in this regiment and one or two in the 119th."

Jim grimaced slightly. This guy had accomplished what he had failed to do, somehow wrangle a way into the regiment he wanted to join. It made him mad but also intrigued as to how he managed it. "How did you pull that off?"

"A friend of mine," Mason began, "is the personnel clerk in the 119th. They kept a core of men from the old division when they rebuilt it in '42. He said he'd try to find me a spot when I got over here either in that regiment or this one. Sure enough, there were orders waiting for me at the repo depot. Only," he bit his lip slightly, "only I haven't heard from Dale, my friend, since. I managed to dodge one or two assignments, but then this one came up for the 120th and I thought I'd get in the division, and see if I could find him."

Jim thought you probably haven't heard from him because he's wounded or dead. The 119th had suffered almost as many casualties as the 120th. "Well, most everybody has gone down to see that actor,

Robinson, perform. I don't know if you'll be able to find your buddy in that mob. Why don't I help you guys get settled in, then maybe we both can take a look for your friend. I wanna hear more about how you dodged a couple of reassignments."

Jim took them down to the bivouac tents negotiating the rows until he found Easy Company. The tent was almost empty but gear was stowed on nearly every cot. He found a couple at the front. Made sense, Jim thought, the veterans wanted the rain and mosquitos to get the new guys first. At least they had a cot. Jim joined the unit as they entered the last of the bocage country. His first two nights were spent on bare ground, and the last couple in the makeshift little dugouts near Tessy-sur-Vire. As far as he was concerned, tents were sheer luxury no matter where his cot was.

"Okay, gentlemen, find yourself one of these cots, put your gear away and I'll take you around to all the division's spots, like the field hospital, the chow wagons, the. . ."

O'Herlihy interrupted. "When do we get division patches?"

Jim gave him a puzzled look as if to say that's all you're worried about? Coming in during the middle of the battle, he hadn't gotten one until the fighting died down and he hadn't sewed it on until yesterday.

"Don't put it on sideways," piped up Mason. "That's what my old man did in World War I. He was with the division when they broke the Hindenburg Line. He said they all turned the triple X's sideways, didn't know they were Roman numerals." The other three stared at their shortest member.

O'Herlihy spoke up, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm just trying to tell you guys some of the history of this outfit." The others continued to stare. Mason looked down from their gaze and muttered, "My dad lost his left foot in the Great War."

Jim thought, shit, this guy is trying to relive some past family glory. He's liable to do some foolhardy thing and get us all killed. But he realized he wasn't so different than Mason. He had wanted to join the 29th for similar reasons. His father hadn't fought in World War I, but he had a great-grandfather and a great uncle who'd fought in the Civil War.

YOUNG HICKORY

“That’s interesting, kid.” Jim said, “glad you got their spirit, but remember, this is a different war.” He smiled when he finished. Mason smiled back. Farrell thought he might have made a friend. About that time an officer entered the tent. Jim snapped to attention and called for the others to do the same.

“At ease, men. My name is Kerley. I’ll be taking over Easy Company. I don’t recognize you from my first time through here.” The men looked at each other wondering exactly what he meant. The lieutenant didn’t explain. He asked their names and made a few comments to each of them. When he got to Jim, he asked with a pronounced Texas drawl, “Are you the eagle eye who impressed Lieutenant Pierce?”

“I’m, I’m not sure, sir. I guess so.”

Kerley looked him over. Jim was taller, though not by much. Kerley said, “I hear you can run too.”

“Yes sir, I can when I have to.”

Kerley put his hand on Jim’s shoulder. “Well, let’s hope all our phones and radios are working, and you won’t have to, but I do have a job for you. Go find all the platoon officers and senior non-coms, and tell them I want them to report to me at,” he looked at his watch, “1645, before they go to the movie.”

Kerley perfectly fit Jim’s idea of a Texas Ranger. His accent, the way he greeted you. It all fit. His appearance made Jim feel the lieutenant was unflappable. It was easy to immediately accept commands from this new commander.

“Yes, sir, uh, sir, I’m not sure I know all of them. I only joined the unit a little over a week ago.”

“I’m not sure I know all of them either, but I’m hoping they remember me. Now head out and find them fast. I wouldn’t want you to miss the movie. I hear it’s a good one with Lucille Ball and June Allyson.”

“Yes, sir.” Jim went out the tent flap and headed back towards where he had met Lieutenant Pierce. He hoped Pierce would help him find the others. Before he got fifty yards, he saw Stein. “Corporal Stein?”

Stein turned around as Jim came up on him. “Yeah, Hick, whatcha want?”

“When did you get promoted?”

“What do you care?” Stein let out a breath and then gave Jim a half-smile. “I was in line to get a stripe after Saint-Lô. It just came in.”

“Uh, congratulations.

“Yeah, yeah, do what you want?”

“Oh, sorry. I’ve been sent by the new company commander to find all the officers and non-coms, but I don’t know any of them other than Pierce and Baloski. You think you can help me?”

Stein dropped his cigarette on the ground, “New commander, huh? What’s his name?”

Jim hesitated for a half-second. “I think he said his name was Kerley.”

“Kerley, Ralph Kerley?”

“Uh,” Jim began, “uh, he didn’t say what his first name was. He sounded like he had been with the unit before. He’s about as tall as me, but not as skinny. And he sounds like he’s from Texas or somewhere down that way.”

“Yep, that’s Kerley. Good man, got wounded near Saint-Lô. Things are looking up, but this is not going to go over well with Pierce. He expected to be named acting company commander. Nope, he’s not going to like this. I better help you out. What did he say?”

“He wants them to meet him at 1645.”

“Did he say where?”

“No, I mean, I don’t think so. I headed out so fast I didn’t think to ask. I guess he meant back at the big tent.”

Stein pointed his finger at Farrell’s head. “Young Hickory, you’re gonna have to do a better job on taking orders if you wanna become a communications orderly. Come on, kid, follow me.”

Stein and Jim found most of the officers and NCO’s at the movies. Stein had been right most of the group that had been there since crossing Omaha Beach were happy to hear Lieutenant Kerley was back. Pierce, on the other hand, gave an expression of disgust followed by a muttered expletive. After that he got up and headed towards the main tent. Stein and Farrell followed him there. Kerley thanked them for getting the officers together. Then, motioned them to leave. The two left, but not be-

fore hearing that the next several days would be occupied with training to try and mesh the new recruits.

Stein said, "So much for movies and movie stars. I'm glad I got a hot shower before we head back to the front."

"Come on, Stein," Jim said, "Patton's carrying the ball. We'll be sittin' pretty for a couple of weeks at least."

Stein shook his head. "I've heard that before, after Vire, after Saint-Lô. The generals like this outfit and that ain't good news. Nope, they're gonna work us to death."

Farrell let that sink in and wondered if things would really be better if he transferred to the battalion command. Jim thought he wanted to see action, and sensed he was going to get it. It just wasn't with the division he thought it would be.

Over the next four days the company staged several exercises with the new recruits. Farrell took the three rookies that had joined his squad and tried to teach them what he could. Unlike Jim, these three had not been training for long. He had practiced long and hard for D-Day, even though he didn't get there. But he quickly found out the new guys had been sent straight out of boot camp. Mason was enthusiastic, but was a worse shot than Jim. O'Herlihy seemed lackadaisical, and had a habit of nodding off at the worse times, even with bullets going off around him. Barsky was still laconic. Jim began to wonder if he understood English. His reaction time seemed to depend on seeing something rather than hearing it. Maybe, just maybe, they'd come around in a week or two.

They didn't get that long. The next day, August 5th, they were ordered into the line to relieve the 1st Infantry which had driven the Germans back beyond Mortain. Kerley briefed them that Mortain was a small town, but it sat in the center of a road network that connected much of the area to Avaranches and Vire. The Germans had to know that with Patton running amok in Brittany any attempt to counterattack would depend on gaining control of that network.

General Omar Bradley knew. He had received information from the secret code breaker program known as Ultra. The German high com-

mand was about to throw four Panzer divisions at the American front that had become stretched by the 3rd Army's race to the south. The planned German offensive was known as Operation Luttich, and was Hitler's attempt to drive a wedge between the American lines by driving his picked divisions toward Avaranches. Bradley saw a real chance for the Americans to not only undermine the German operation, but allow for the Americans to carry a flanking movement that, if helped by the British and the Canadians, could bag a huge part of the German army on the Atlantic Front. What it required was the courage of an American division to hold off the large German attack until Bradley's plan could unfold. A hardworking division, a division that would not know or could not know Bradley's plan because of the need to keep ULTRA secret. A division that would be set out like bait to entice the Germans to continue their attack until everything fell in place, a division as tough as Old Hickory.²