

## Duty to Comrades

The snow, which had begun as lazy, drifting Christmas Card flakes, had turned into nasty, driving ice particles which stung as they hit exposed flesh. Franz pulled his scarf tighter, and mumbled a curse as he crouched behind his squad leader beside the edge of the road. They had spent the last three hours of the long winter twilight reconnoitering the abandoned network of trenches. The Amis were encamped just over the next rise. Morning would see a major advance. There were at least thirty tanks, many heavy armored vehicles. The only obstacle to the Amis advance was the narrow pass Gerhardt's squad was now exploring.

Oberscharführer Gerhardt Eugen tugged his white winter camouflage smock into place, and prepared to cross the open road. "Wait thirty seconds after I cross, then come at intervals. Franz, you follow me, then Gunther, Willi, Karl and Georg. Keep your heads down and stay alert. Just because we don't see any Amis doesn't mean they aren't there." "Just what I need", he thought. "Five scared kids just out of basic training. Next I suppose I'll get them still in diapers".

Gerhardt started across the road in a low, crouching run. Franz watched tensely, waiting for his cue. Suddenly Gerhardt stopped, then moving carefully, detoured a meter or so to the uphill side, turned to the waiting men and gestured frantically. He pantomimed danger, then dove for the opposite drainage ditch.

"Mines" murmured the man behind Franz. "Watch yourself, Franz. Now go!" He gave Franz a friendly cuff on the shoulder. Franz paused a second on hands and knees, then sprinted across the road in a low crouch, carefully avoiding the lump in the middle of the road. He ended with a leap into the slush filled ditch, only a few centimeters from his squad leader.

"Verdamnt, Junge , watch your feet . . ." growled the disgusted sergeant, wiping the muddy slush from his face. Whatever else he intended to say was drowned in a teeth rattling roar. Franz buried his face in his arms as chunks of rock, mud and shards of red hot metal from the exploding land mine pelted him. He felt something fall on his outstretched arm, and opened his eyes to brush it away. He turned and was violently and ingloriously sick. The object was a human hand, still wearing its regimental ring, the hand that had just ... his mind shuddered away from the thought. He wanted to run, gibbering and shrieking, but training held him motionless. A groan from Gerhardt brought him back to reality.

"Franz, give me a hand. I'm hit. I can't move my right arm." Gerhardt heaved himself into a half sitting position, and looked out at the road. He closed

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his eyes briefly. "Himmel Herr Gott... they're . . ." his voice faltered. "They're all dead." Franz looked briefly at the carnage across the road. His head swam, for a moment a black film seemed to cloud his vision. He gritted his teeth and fumbled for the aid kit.

Gerhardt's right side was covered with blood, and his arm dangled uselessly. Franz ripped the torn sleeve, groped for the gauze sponges, praying he could remember enough of his aid training to do the right thing. "First stop the bleeding, then immobilize any fractures..." How the hell was he going to immobilize anything here? Gerhardt's upper arm was torn open, the broken ends of bone protruding.

"Use the wound powder, then stuff some gauze in, and wrap it tight." Gerhardt gritted through clenched teeth. "Use the tent stake and the sling, tie across my chest.."

After an eternity divided between frozen intervals of intense listening to hear if the Amis were coming to investigate the explosion and fumbling with cold numbed fingers, Franz had done what he could. He reached into the aid kit, took out the styrette of morphine.

Gerhardt shook his head. "No, not now. Maybe later. Right now I've got some thinking to do." He leaned back against the crumbling dirt embankment, his face ashen and sweat covered despite the cold. "God, it hurts," he thought. "Now what? Franz doesn't seem to be wounded, and he's a good kid, but he's just a kid. Someone has to delay those bastards, and we have to get this information back to base." He became aware that Franz was trying to talk to him.

"...if you can make it back alone. I don't know the way. I can handle the Panzerfaust, though, and slow them down some."

"All you have to do is follow the road, you know that. I can't leave you here by yourself. Better you take my notes back. Here," he fumbled with his left hand, "You saw what is over the rise. Take my sketches..." he paused, gulping air, fighting the nausea that the movement brought.

"No," said Franz slowly. "We have to be realistic about this. You can't handle a Panzerfaust, not with your right arm broken. I can, I scored high in training with them. You know more about the enemy strength and equipment than I could tell HQ. I think it's pretty clear. I'll hold them off as long as I can. With any luck, I can get one or two, and it'll take them some time to clear the pass for the next tank. The only question is, can you walk?"

Gerhardt considered. "I'll have to," he grinned through lips bitten bloody with pain, "They aren't going to send a taxi for us." "OK, Junge, help me up. Remember to keep your head down, and don't stay in one place after you fire. Keep moving if you can. Find some good positions, and put a couple of PF's in

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each one. Then you can move fast. Watch for mines and trip wires. See if you can hold them off for at least six hours, then get the hell out of here. Every hour you can give us means more time to move the unit out of this trap and the lives of hundreds of our comrades. Gerhardt paused, took a few painful steps on the long road back. He turned. "Franz...You're a good trooper. I'm proud of you. Leb' wohl." With a half wave, half salute he turned and resolutely slogged on.

Franz watched his sergeant a few seconds, wishing desperately that he could go to him, help him. He sighed, squared his shoulders, knowing he had a job to do, and not much time now to do it. He had to find positions before it became full dark, and get the PFs in place so he could find them quickly. He crawled down the road toward the place where they had piled the equipment before they had gone forward to explore. For a few heart stopping moments he couldn't remember where it was. Then, yes, there. They had hidden their weapons almost too well.

He stripped off the tarp, grabbed a couple of Panzerfausts. He spotted a bulge of rock at the edge of the rising face of the pass. "Good enough," he thought. "Position one." He left the PFs, ran back to the pile of equipment. "Better see what I've got." He counted ten more PFs, three limpet mines. He had his rifle, of course, and a couple hundred rounds. Belt knife, entrenching tool. "I'm a walking arms factory," he mused "all I need is heavy artillery and I could be a battalion." It was now completely dark, and he could no longer see. He hunkered down beside the pile of weapons, spread his ground cloth, pulled the tarpaulin over himself and the pile of equipment and tried to get some rest.

He dozed fitfully, cold and tense. At last the darkness seemed less intense, and he looked at his watch. 05:08. Nearly time to get moving. He ought to eat something, couldn't. He took a few swallows from his canteen. Time to go. He checked the position he had found last night, then distributed the PFs in five more locations, none of which looked like great cover, but the best to be had. The limpet mines and his rifle he left in a slit trench about 200 meters behind the last position. He felt naked without the rifle, but knew he needed freedom of motion more than a rifle.

"It would help to be an octopus," he thought. He readied the Panzerfaust, and crouched down to wait. He could hear the rumble of tanks. It wouldn't be long.

The roar increased in volume and pitch, a crunching grinding sound that shook the earth. The first tank crested the rise. As the nose of the tank heaved over the crumbling earth, Franz rose to his feet. Standing well braced, as he had been taught, he fired at the left tread of the monster. Hit! Grab the next PF. Now the right tread. Another hit! The damn thing was stuck for fair. The wheels spun frantically, but with the tread in pieces, all it could was lumber forward a few meters and stop.

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Had they seen the flash? Franz took a flying leap and rolled into his next position, fear and elation warring in his mind. He had only a few seconds to make himself as invisible as possible. They would be boiling out of the tank like angry bees out of a tipped over hive. Yes, here they came now! The hatch slammed open, and angry voices shouted. Franz' command of English was spotty, but he could make out a word or two. "Mines, goddamn fucking mines...,"

So they hadn't seen him! He was almost weak with relief, when another thought struck him. The road was mined. Suppose he had landed on one? No! Don't think about that.

He watched, with what would have been amusement if he hadn't been so cold and scared. But it was funny, in a way. They were going to have to back up the entire column, and try to drag the disabled tank backwards over the pass. The road wasn't wide enough to allow another tank to pass. The rock walls on either side were too steep to climb. It would take them at least a couple of hours, thought Franz gleefully.

He eased his cramped legs carefully. They didn't seem to be looking in his direction. Slowly he crawled toward the rock face. A slight overhang formed a sort of narrow cave. He was going to have to wait a while for the next customer. Suddenly he was ravenous. He squirmed around, trying to get comfortable. He reached his bread bag, and found the chunk of bread and tube of meat paste that served as forward rations. The soldiers had a very uncomplimentary name for the stuff, but nasty as it was it tasted better than any food ever had before. He settled down to watch the show, munching happily.

He awoke with a start. The tank was gone. He looked guiltily at his watch. 09:23. It had taken them over three hours to clear the pass. Great. But suppose he had slept through the next one? How humiliating. Grimly he resolved to stay awake no matter what. He shrank back against the far wall of the sheltering niche as the unmistakable whine of a shell sent a chill through him. The resulting explosion showered him with rock fragments and ice chunks, but hit well down the road. Another one. Damn, what were they doing? Then it dawned on him, they were trying to explode any mines with fire from tank guns. God, to have so much ammunition to waste! Slower this time, the tank crawled up over the rise. Franz stood, fired . Missed ! Damn ! Grabbed the other PF . Fired . Hit!. The tank, which was just beginning to come down over the crest, spun, skidded sideways and crashed against the rock wall, its gun bent at an impossible angle.

Crouching, he ran to his next position, flung himself flat. They surely must know he was out here by now. He strained to listen. "...must be a fucking Kraut patrol, Sarge. I think I saw a flash. . ." The voice was so close that he almost jumped. He froze, keeping his head down. The passing Amis almost stepped on him.

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This time it took even longer to haul the bent wreck away. It was nearly 14:00 before the next tank rumbled toward him. Again he stood, fired, and tore off the right tread. The second PF misfired. Again the Amis began the long and difficult job of backing off the column and hauling the wreck out of the way.

By the time the road was clear, it was beginning to get dark. "I could leave now," thought Franz. "Gerhard said six hours, and it's been twelve. I'd better wait until full dark. There must be a hundred men out looking for the "Kraut patrol". He lay there, thinking about getting back, hot soup and dry clothes.

"...don't want to lose another tank. Guess we wait till morning, they're gonna call in air support..." the voice faded as the patrol slogged past him. "My God, they're going to send the bombers after me!" he thought, horrified. Then he realized that there would be no more tanks through today. If he could just hold out for one more night, he could probably manage one or two more kills before...

He waited until he was sure the last patrol was gone. In the near darkness he found a sheltered spot in one of the abandoned trenches. He curled up in the damp tarpaulin and dozed fitfully through the cold and miserable night.

The roar of bombers roused him from a half frozen stupor. The chatter of machine gun fire marched down the road, missing his position by centimeters. The bombs fell a few meters from the road on both sides. Evidently they didn't want to tear up the road so badly that the tanks would bog down in the craters.

As the bombers roared off, Franz hauled his stiff and aching body out of the trench and into his next position. He knew now that he wasn't going back. He would stay, and do all he could to delay the enemy advance. There was a curious peace in knowing that he was probably not going to see another sunrise. Everything seemed more vivid, sharper focused. Throughout the long day, he repeated the actions of the day before. Stand, shoot, then wait until they had cleared away the mess and the next one came. Each time it took them longer, and the search, if possible, for the "ghost patrol" as they were now calling it, was more intense. Why hadn't they found him, Franz wondered. Perhaps because they were looking for a squad, rather than one man.

Noon the following day found him at the last trench. He had used the last two Panzerfausts, and now was waiting for the tanks to overrun his position. He hoped fervently that he was right about them not being able to see the narrow trench, obscured as it was by the snow and mud.

Now! Franz crouched as low as he could as the monster started across the narrow gap. Waiting as long as he dared, he armed the magnetic mine and slapped it in place. The tank rumbled on. Thank God...what if it decided to stop... now the next one in line. Yes! Arm the mine, slap it in place and hope. One more left. The tank moved slowly forward. Franz held his breath until it

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cleared the far wall. The trench, narrow to start with, was getting uncomfortably tight. He faced the horrifying possibility of being buried alive. "Please God, not that," he murmured. He squirmed up enough to see over the edge. The next tank was approaching. He groped for his last mine. Then, with a thunderous roar, the first tank exploded. Franz winced at the screams of the trapped men. Up to now, it had been a sort of dangerous game, with nothing getting seriously damaged except the tanks. He thought of his comrades, torn to pieces by a land mine, of Gerhardt, carrying on in agony. What could possibly be worth this? He seemed again to hear Gerhardt's words . . . "every hour you can give us means the lives of many of our comrades..." he knew he would see it through. He still had one more mine and his rifle. The second tank blew.

The air was full of the stench of burning rubber and metal and worse. He gagged. The third tank started across. Stopped. Just on the edge of the trench. He couldn't reach anything but the heavily armored front. He placed the mine against the forward driving wheel.

By now the walls of the trench were so tight he couldn't breathe. He squirmed and wriggled trying to get out of the trench. He was held fast, his pants were caught on something and in the vice like grip of the trench, he could not free them. He snapped open the belt clip and wiggled free, scraping and lacerating his legs. He crawled as fast as he could away from the center of the road. He saw the gun traverse and depress, he threw himself into the ditch at the verge, knowing it was useless, knowing that at point blank range there was no hope at all. The mine blew, rocking the tank back. The shell whistled three meters over his head, and gouged a large chunk out of the rock wall. Bleeding from dozens of cuts and lacerations from rock fragments, his uniform in shreds, deafened by the explosion he lay dazed. A small avalanche of rock and snow covered him.

Hours later, he slowly drifted back to consciousness. He thought distractedly that somehow it wasn't even cold anymore. He felt almost warm, and so sleepy. . . He jerked himself awake. This was what they warned him about in training. The euphoria that takes you unaware, just before your freeze to death. It was so tempting, just to lie there, and drift off.... From out of the depths of his memory, Gerhardt's last words came to him. "... I'm proud of you, you're a good trooper..." Warily he got to his hands and knees, clawing the snow and rock from his body. Using his rifle as a prop, he got to his feet. If there were any Amis around, he was a clear target. He waited for the shot that didn't come. He tried to think what to do now, but his dazed brain wasn't working. Finally he decided that he would try to find some cover, somewhere he could make a final stand.

He looked around. The area was strangely quiet. Where were they? Evidently regrouping behind the rise. He didn't have the energy to find out. He still had his rifle and over a hundred rounds. Save the last one, he thought

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muzzily. He had heard what the Amis did to SS prisoners, and they surely had no reason to spare him. He took one round, buttoned it in his shirt pocket. "Mine," he muttered. The thought gave him a strange sort of confidence.

He plodded on down the road, looking for a likely spot. Nothing. The road was flatter now, fields on either side, but not even a tree large enough to hide behind. Then, about two hundred meters further on, a ruined stone farm building. One wall looked to be partly intact. Perhaps there. He picked up the pace. Intent on his goal, he didn't see the body until he tripped over it, and went sprawling in the snow. He looked at the bloody corpse. "Oh my God, it's Gerhardt," he sobbed. He got to his knees, cradled the dead man in his arms. Tears streamed down his face. Eventually he got to his feet. Through his sorrow and pain came the realization that the vital information that Gerhardt had been carrying had never gotten to HQ. Now it was up to him to get it there.

He knelt again, took the map case from Gerhardt's belt and then reached inside his shirt, took the identity disk and snapped it in half. He put the small, final object in his blouse pocket. It clinked against the rifle round. He stood for a moment, saying his last farewell. "Leb' wohl in Ewigkeiten..."

Hours later, an advance patrol of the LAH picked up a staggering, exhausted Franz. With difficulty they pried his fingers from the map case, and from his rifle.

Two weeks later, a stony faced Franz stood in his first parade review since his release from the hospital. He still didn't feel able to think, he just reacted from habit. He stood with the survivors of the Division, his mind numb. He realized with a start that the inspecting General had stopped in front of him. He stared the regulation fifteen centimeters over the officer's left shoulder, trying not to move, or think of anything at all. In shock, he suddenly realized it was Kurt Meyer, Panzermeyer, the Division Commander. He heard him read the words of the citation, felt him pin the medal to his uniform blouse, but none of it really sank in until Gen. Meyer shook his hand, and said, "Please meet me at my ready room as soon as the formation is dismissed."

What the Hell was going on? A Brigadeführer doesn't seek out a Sturmmann for tea and crumpets. Not even Panzermeyer, who had the reputation of being unlike most General officers. "Well," he thought as he walked toward the building which was serving as temporary HQ, "Orders are orders, and I guess they aren't going to shoot me, not today anyway." He touched the Iron Cross on his tunic unbelievably. "I don't deserve this, it really belongs to Gerhardt and Gunther and Willi and Karl and Georg. I wasn't brave at all. I was scared shitless the whole time. I just did what I had to..." His musings were cut short by his arrival at HQ.

Ushered into the General's spartan ready room, he stood at rigid attention in front of the battered table Panzermeyer was using as a desk. Kurt Meyer

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looked for a moment at the grim faced young trooper. "At ease, son" he said gently, a warm smile on his face. He came around the desk, and took the astonished Franz by the arm. He led him to one of two camp chairs, the only other furniture in the room, and told him to sit. "Now," Panzermeyer said, "I've read the official version, and I think you earned that medal ten times over. I want to hear you tell it, just as it happened to you."

Franz sat for a moment, looking unbelievably at the General. The force of the man's personality held him speechless. This can't be happening, he thought wildly.

"You were on forward patrol with Obersharführer Eugen, " Meyer prompted gently. Franz answered, began to speak, haltingly at first, and then more fully, skillfully prompted by Meyer. Finally, as he came to finding Gerhardt's body, tears were flowing freely down his face, and he bent over, sobbing. He was aware of the General's arm around his shoulders. He tried to stifle his sobs, brokenly asking pardon. Meyer looked at him for a long moment and said, "Son, grief for a Comrade is nothing to feel shame for." They talked a while longer until Franz had regained his composure. Panzermeyer looked at him with a twinkle in his eye. "What you did saved hundreds of lives, and enabled the Division to escape from the trap and fight another day. I can't tell you how proud we are of you. But I must say, son, that you are the first trooper to win the Iron Cross by losing your pants to a collapsing trench!"

As he stood at the window, watching the young Sturmman cross the parade ground with a more confident step, Panzermeyer mused, not for the first time, on the bitter fact that the rest of the German military tradition of being a father to your troops meant sending your sons into battle.