

HALF THE BATTLE

By Lou
mlhoskin@yahoo.ca





Saunders rubbed his eyes wearily. The day had been far too full and it wasn't over yet. Perched in the steeple window, he brought the binoculars up again to search the street below and the distant trees for enemy movement, anxious to avoid another surprise like the patrol they had met on the road outside town.

His men moved back to the church, having efficiently checked out their second small town of the day. Only Doc and Adams, the new replacement, were there with Saunders. Adams, resting against the wall next to Doc, was pale, his face almost as white as his sling, and Doc reassured him intermittently. Saunders waved Doc over for a report.

Doc responded quietly, "Well, Sarge, the arm doesn't look too bad but he's hurtin' too much. Knowin' what you're lookin' at is half the battle, an' right now I'm not sure what I'm lookin' at."

Saunders figured that had been their problem in the skirmish this morning: they'd been attacked from the trees and hadn't known what they were looking at until it was too late. They had taken out the enemy patrol but had lost two good men, and Adams here was looking pretty rough. Nobody else had been badly hurt, just a few nicks here and there, but they were all a bit disheartened by the events of the day. Hanley had called it a piece of cake, check out three little towns, in and out. There weren't supposed to be Germans in the area. Somebody should have told that to the Germans.

Littlejohn reached the door first, calling out as he entered, "All clear, Sarge." The three soldiers pounded up the stairs and stood watching their sergeant expectantly.

Saunders took one last long look through the binoculars. "Okay, men, let's move out. One more town to check and we'll head home." Saunders paused halfway down the stairs. "Doc, can Adams do it? Shouldn't be far, but it'll still take time."

"I think he'll be okay for now, Sarge. I'll let you know if it turns into a problem."

They headed out at an easy pace with Cajé on point and Kirby covering the rear. Once they reached the trees they left the road, heading directly west toward the next town. According to the map, the road meandered through the countryside and crossed a river twice, so they could save time this way as long as the forest wasn't too thick.

Suddenly there was a stifled oath from the rear and Kirby dropped to the ground. The squad halted as Littlejohn knelt beside him.

"What happened, Kirby?"

"Whaddya think? I twisted my ankle. Ow, don't touch it, ya big oaf! Just help me up, I'm okay." Kirby began to push himself up against Littlejohn's shoulder.

Saunders joined them. "Shut up, Kirby. Doc, check him out."

Littlejohn lowered Kirby back to the ground and watched intently as the boot was removed. "Hey, Sarge, look, it's already swollen. How do you do it Kirby? You're always getting out of the work, leaving us to do it on our own."

"Why you-" Kirby began, but Saunders cut him off.

"Alright you two, there's no time for this! We've got a job to do. The sooner we do it, the sooner we get home. Doc?"

Doc shook his head slowly. "Sorry Sarge, he's not gonna be any good to you, he'll only slow you up. I wrapped it tight, but he's out of it for today."

Kirby struggled to his feet. "No way, Doc, I ain't goin' back. Sarge needs us all, don't ya Sarge? See, I can walk, I can do this for miles."

The others watched skeptically as he took three limping steps and crumpled on the fourth. Saunders sighed.

"Right, Doc, you take him and Adams back, and let the Lieutenant know about that patrol back there, since we have no radio to report with." There was a brief silence. The radio had been on Williams' back when the grenade had taken him out. "We'll check the next town and be back by dark." *I hope*, he thought darkly.

"Got it, Sarge." Doc helped Kirby to his feet, took his right arm across his shoulders, and turned to head back the way they had come. Adams followed forlornly, keeping close to Doc and Kirby but glancing back at the others every few moments.

Saunders considered Cajé and Littlejohn. "Just one more town and we're home free. Good thing the towns here are so close together. Saddle up."

The three advanced through the trees swiftly but carefully, eager to complete the mission and head home. The sun beat down and the day became warmer as they went. Finally Saunders called a halt.

They quickly slid out of their jackets, hooking them in their belts, and gulped tepid water from canteens as they leaned against the trees. Littlejohn spoke first.

"Sarge, how come we missed seeing that patrol this morning? We were just as careful as we always are, weren't we?"

"You've got a lot of experience out here, Littlejohn, you're not some green recruit. We can't always know what the enemy's going to do. We just have to be ready, to know what we're doing when they turn up." Saunders thought back to Doc's earlier words. "Knowing what you're looking at is half the battle, that's what Doc said, and I think he's right. We may not know they're around, but if we're ready anyway, maybe they can't get the drop on us."

Caje stroked his rifle thoughtfully. "Is that why we had trouble at the first town today? We didn't make sure the new guys knew what they were looking at? Cause they sure found trouble. Lucky they didn't get it when that booby trap went off."

Littlejohn muttered, "No, they got it later on. You can be ready for some things I guess, but when the Krauts turned up on the road there was no way to be ready for..." Littlejohn stopped mid-sentence, head swivelling toward a snap in the woods.

Saunders waved the others to cover as he scooped up his helmet and ducked into some brush. Caje stole quickly behind a tree, while Littlejohn folded his long legs beneath him as he slipped into a nearby hollow. Only their eyes moved, constantly scanning the woods around them and keeping track of one another at the same time. After five long minutes had passed with no further sound, Saunders motioned for the others to follow him and headed off again.

It wasn't long before Saunders stopped abruptly. Littlejohn looked confused. "Hey, Sarge, I didn't think the river was over here."

Saunders sat on a fallen log to study his map while Caje scanned the opposite riverbank and Littlejohn watched the trees they had just left. Finally the situation became clear. They had inadvertently turned slightly north after the scare, and if they followed the river south to the bend they could get back on track. Then it would be a short trek through the trees to the last little village, and with any luck they'd be able to head home pretty quickly.

With Caje back on point and Littlejohn close behind, the three hurried on. As they left the river and headed into the trees Caje gestured to his right. "I can see a building through there, maybe a house or something. Should we check it out or keep moving?"

A building of any sort would be a likely spot for Germans to hole up, so they slipped cautiously toward it. In the center of a small clearing stood what was left of a derelict farmhouse, just a chimney and one wall still standing. Household odds and ends poked through the grass near the wall. The only place Germans could be hiding was in the small shed near the far side of the yard, and Saunders took Littlejohn to check it out, leaving Caje to stand watch.

Quietly, Saunders moved close. Motioning for Littlejohn to cover him, he flung open the door and quickly scanned the room, Thompson at the ready. Nothing. No people, no weapons. Littlejohn ducked to look in, then turned toward Caje and shrugged. "Nobody home."

Caje started across the yard, still scanning the surrounding forest. "I'm pretty sure the village is just over there, Sarge. We can be in and out in no time. Hey-" With that, the ground swallowed him up.

Saunders dashed past Littlejohn but stopped just shy of the spot where Caje had last stepped. "Caje? What happened?"

"I'm down here. Be careful!" Caje's voice rose from a small hole in the middle of the yard. Saunders lay down and cautiously belly-crawled closer. Nearing the hole, he could see Caje's fingers gripping the broken edge of a board but as he watched in dismay those fingers suddenly slipped.



Caje's disembodied voice spoke again. "It's okay, don't worry, I have hold of some roots down here. They're pretty thick so they'll hold me, but I can't get high enough to grab the top edge from here. The sides of this thing are pretty slick except where the roots are."

Saunders slid forward with care to peer down into Caje's upturned face. The boards covering the old well were rotten and covered with moss; they had given way when Caje stepped on them. Staring into the darkness below wouldn't tell how deep it was.

Reaching down only succeeded in knocking dirt from the rim into Caje's face. Saunders' arms weren't long enough to meet Caje's hands, and if he slid forward any farther he was in danger of falling in himself. Somehow he had to find a solution.

"You okay for a few minutes? I've got an idea, but I'll need to get it set up."

"That's okay, Sarge, I'm not going anywhere. But hurry, hanging around like this is tough on my shoulders."

"We'll be quick."

Sitting up, Saunders removed his web belt and set it to the side next to his helmet and Tommy gun. Handing the binoculars to Littlejohn, he headed to the edge of the clearing to search for a long sturdy branch. He discarded two that broke as soon as he put pressure on them and ended up with a small fallen tree.

"Littlejohn, come help me with this. We'll put it across the top of the well and it'll give us something sturdy to lean on." They manhandled the tree across the clearing, placing it across the part of the well that still had boards and leaving the hole open where Caje had broken through.

Littlejohn looked at Saunders expectantly. "Now what? He still can't reach the top."

"No, but now the edge won't cave in under us. You lie across the tree and pull him up. I'll sit on your legs so you don't get pulled down." He raised his voice. "Caje, Littlejohn's going to reach down for you. Grab his hands and we'll pull you up."

Littlejohn looked doubtfully at the tree, and then obediently worked his way over from the far side of the well. With the Sarge holding him he shouldn't fall, but it was unnerving to stretch down into the darkness. He wriggled until the tree was at his waist and extended his arms. To his surprise he was now within reach, and as soon as he felt solidly anchored he beckoned to Caje. "Let's go, time to get you up into the fresh air again."

Caje tentatively reached for Littlejohn with one hand, clasping his arm near the elbow for security, and as soon as their grip was firm he brought the other hand over. "Sarge," Littlejohn called, "This isn't going to work. I've got hold of him but I can't lever myself up to get him out of here."

"I'll help you back up. He'll be higher then and I can help pull."

Squirming got Littlejohn nowhere. "Got any other ideas?"

"Maybe. But I'll have to get off you. Will his weight pull you down?"

"I'll grab the roots again with one hand," Caje chimed in. "That'll take some of the load off. Will that help?"

"Yeah, thanks, Caje. Okay Sarge, we're fine for now."

Saunders gingerly stood, watching briefly to be sure Littlejohn didn't begin to slide in after his friend, and then dashed across to the farmhouse wall. A discarded chain had caught his eye earlier and he sprinted back with it.

"Caje, here's a chain. Littlejohn, you'll have to move before he can get out."

"Don't worry, I'll move." Suiting action to words, as soon as Caje began to transfer his weight to the chain dangling over the tree trunk, Littlejohn backed out of the way. He rubbed his shoulders quickly, then joined Saunders on the end of the chain to pull Caje to safety.

Finally out of the well, Caje rolled onto his back gulping the fresh forest air. Saunders massaged his shoulders for him and Littlejohn gathered up web belts, helmets, and weapons, conscious that Caje's helmet and M1 were at the bottom of the well.

As soon as they collected themselves the three moved into the forest once again, Saunders taking point and Littlejohn at the rear. Caje was exhausted after his ordeal, but they couldn't spare recovery time – that would have to come later.



It wasn't far to the edge of the trees, and as they emerged into the sunlight they could see the town just ahead, down a small slope. Wary of enemy activity, Saunders reached for his binoculars. And then he became very still.

"Littlejohn, where are my binoculars?"

"I don't know, Sarge, don't you have them? Oh, yeah, you gave them to me to look after, and I..." Realization dawned as Saunders glared at him and his words tumbled out. "They were in the way so I put them down when I was helping you with the tree, um, don't worry Sarge, I'll go and get them, it's not very far, I'll be right back, you won't even miss me..." With that Littlejohn was gone.

Gazing intently at the town, Saunders spoke quietly. "We need to check it quick and get out."

Just within the forest on their far left Cajé glimpsed movement. "Sarge," he whispered, "I'm pretty sure someone's over there."

Saunders glanced in the direction Cajé had indicated. Nothing stirred. But the scout had an uncanny knack of sensing things. He unholstered his gun, surreptitiously passing it to Cajé along with a grenade. At least now they could both defend themselves. "Any idea how many there are?"

Cajé shook his head. "Can't make anyone out clearly, but they're there all right. Do we make a run for it?"

Saunders shook his head slightly, signalling to move back into the trees. He hoped they hadn't been seen.

That hope was quickly crushed as a bullet smacked into the tree behind him. Startled, the two GIs dropped behind the trees to return fire, frustrated that they still couldn't make out individual soldiers. Saunders signalled to Cajé to get his grenade into the area where the shots were coming from. As the private slid noiselessly away to try to find a clear line of sight, Saunders fired fast and furious to keep the enemy occupied.

An explosion, a moment of silence, and then an unwelcome voice. "Sergeant! We have your man. Throw down your weapon." Cajé was shoved through the trees and into view. A pistol – Saunders' pistol – was held to his head by a German sergeant whose three men trained their guns on Saunders.

As he retrieved the binoculars, Littlejohn heard the sounds of battle and turned to run back to his squad-mates. Before he made it across the farmyard, a grenade exploded in the distance and the firefight stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Littlejohn's spirits plummeted as he knew that with only the Sarge's Tommy gun and .45, the two wouldn't stand a chance against a full patrol. Anxious to see what had happened and afraid for the others he moved quietly through the trees, thinking that a crummy day had suddenly gotten a great deal worse.

Saunders and Cajé headed through the woods, hands bound behind them. The sergeant shouted when Cajé stumbled, and he shoved the private upright again, furiously backhanding Saunders across the face when he stepped closer to support his scout.

Littlejohn slipped from tree to tree. Before he could set Sarge and Cajé free, he would have to figure out where they were headed and how many men the Kraut sergeant had with him. So far there were only three privates in sight, one with a soiled bandage around his head, but that didn't mean that others weren't nearby.

It was the sergeant who drew Littlejohn's attention. Somehow he was stomping silently, face dark and intense, body taut and gestures restrained. When Cajé tripped over a tree root, the German NCO was incensed, roughly thrusting him upright and striking Saunders in fury when he moved close. Littlejohn shook his head as he kept himself back. Rushing in now would either cause his friends' deaths or his own capture, and he needed to avoid both. Knowing what you were looking at was half the battle, Doc had said, so he watched intently. If he was right, the rage in the enemy sergeant could be used against him. It was just a matter of finding the right time and place, a matter of patience and opportunity.

Saunders and Cajé struggled through the trees, stumbling over exposed roots and earning the wrath of their captor. In just a few minutes they emerged into the clearing with the derelict farmhouse and



empty shed. And, of course, the same partially concealed well. Saunders was relieved that there was no sign of Littlejohn and hoped that his absence meant that he was working on a way to free them.

"Why didn't you take us to the town we saw over there?"

"Don't worry, I have men in that town getting it ready for your friends. They will leave their gifts behind and join us soon. But for now, tell me your mission here."

"Saunders, Sergeant, 227-06-22." A smile played around his mouth despite the growing bruise along his jawline.

The sergeant glared at him. "You will answer my question. What is your mission here?"

"Looks like maybe it was to get captured by you. Saunders, Sergeant, 227-06-22." As they continued walking while talking, Saunders tripped and fell heavily into two of the guards, knocking them into their NCO and sending the three down clumsily. Trailing behind, the other soldier fired a warning shot and Cajé froze mid-stride.

Littlejohn had been staying back as far as possible while keeping his eyes on the men. The distance he was forced to maintain kept him from moving in quickly during the confusion, and he had to watch events unfold from nearby cover.

If the German sergeant had been angry before, now he was furious. Once back on his feet, he spat orders at his men. They grabbed Saunders' arms and held him firmly while their leader beat him. Blows to body and head soon subdued the noncom, who hung unresponsive in his guards' hands. In disgust, the sergeant threw one last punch and barked orders to drag the unconscious prisoner to the shed.

Cajé was now faced with the questions Saunders hadn't answered. When he repeatedly responded with name, rank and serial number, the sergeant didn't bother expending the energy to beat him but had him hauled to the shed as well. One private was detailed to guard duty and another readied the radio while listening intently to his leader's instructions. The wounded man sank to the ground, leaning wearily against the chimney.

Littlejohn realized that he would have to act soon or the rest of the enemy squad would be on top of them and he would lose any chance of freeing his friends. Fortunately he now had a plan and he stealthily circled the clearing until he was directly behind the shed.

A bayonet can make a small hole in a wooden wall, but to Littlejohn it seemed to take an eternity and he worked anxiously, fearful that one of the Germans would take this moment to check out the rest of the clearing. Happily they were all otherwise engaged, one now asleep against the old chimney, one breaking out rations as he guarded the shed's door, and the other trying to reach someone on the radio for the impatient sergeant who stood tapping his foot with arms crossed and muttering angrily.

Finally the point of the bayonet was through the wall and Littlejohn leaned close to the hole to peer through. He spoke quietly into the darkness. "Sarge! Cajé!"

"Yeah," Cajé whispered back.

"Cajé, what about the Sarge?"

"He's here but he's still out of it. It's pretty dark but I can tell he's breathing."

Littlejohn had expected the Sarge's help. His plans would have to change immediately. He checked on the Germans' positions, conscious that everything had to happen silently so they wouldn't risk alerting any nearby troops.

"Wait by the door," Littlejohn hissed. "Once the guard's gone you can sneak out and get the injured Kraut. He's asleep against the chimney."

At the Cajun's affirmative response Littlejohn moved slightly into the woods and deliberately broke a branch, careful not to be too loud. He wanted only the guard, not the sergeant, to leave his post and come to investigate.

Happily the guard did just that, and as he rounded the back corner of the shed and disappeared from the view of the others a huge hand covered his mouth and a bayonet through his ribs ended his life. Littlejohn carefully laid the body on the ground and slipped to the bayonet hole.

"Got him," he breathed. "Be ready."

Littlejohn picked his way carefully but speedily to the far side of the farmyard, stopping when he was exactly opposite the sergeant and just barely within the trees. This spot would do nicely. He shook a nearby bush enough to attract notice without showing himself and watched as the two glanced his way but turned back to the radio. Dropping a rock caught their attention and this time they began moving slowly across the yard, still heatedly discussing the radio transmission.

Littlejohn let himself be seen briefly, and now the sergeant began to run. Intent on his quarry, he never saw the hole that conveniently swallowed him up. He fell to the bottom with a chilling yell that stopped abruptly. In the corner of his vision Littlejohn saw Cajé stealthily sneak up to the chimney and the sleeping soldier and use the man's own bayonet to kill him, but he had his own target to focus on. The soldier with the sergeant had stopped to look down into the well, ashen-faced, but he still had his rifle at the ready. Littlejohn would need a distraction before he could effectively disarm him.

Movement at the shed door was followed by a weak call. "Hey, Kraut. Over here." Saunders had crawled to the doorway and waved his arm to attract attention. As the soldier turned, Littlejohn charged him from the trees, taking him down and removing his weapon in one quick movement. In another moment the prisoner was bound and gagged and Littlejohn hauled the man to his feet, watching Cajé race to the shed to scoop Saunders up. The noncom could barely stand but staggered over to Littlejohn with the scout's support, finally collapsing with a small cry of pain as his bruised ribs met the earth.

Littlejohn handed Cajé his M1. "I'll take the Sarge, you take the prisoner." With that he gently gathered Saunders in his arms and followed Cajé into the trees.

Aware that there were troops nearby in the little village, they ran for fifteen minutes before they felt secure enough to rest. Cajé kept the prisoner covered while Littlejohn laid Saunders beside a trickling stream, wetting his handkerchief to carefully wipe the sergeant's bruised face. It took a few minutes of blinking before Saunders was able to focus, but as he gazed around he still looked confused.

Littlejohn anticipated the questions. "It's okay Sarge, we're in the woods on our way home. We got rid of the other Krauts but kept this one as a gift for Lieutenant Hanley."

Saunders strove to sit up but Littlejohn pressed him back down so he relaxed, drifting in and out. "That's right Sarge, just rest. Everyone needs a break. We'll head out again soon enough."

Cajé agreed. "I'll check the road." With that he was gone.

Keeping one eye on the prisoner, Littlejohn made a litter with stout branches and his own jacket, ready to add Cajé's jacket when he returned.

By nightfall they were turning over their prisoner, their sergeant, and their report but it was hours before Littlejohn's patient waiting in the aid tent was rewarded. Saunders' eyes finally opened and after scanning the room, settled on the big man next to him.

"You must have done a good job out there."

"Thanks, Sarge."

"But how did you deal with the sergeant?"

"Well, I just hid and watched. I kept thinking what Doc said, you know, about knowing what you're looking at being half the battle, and I sure wanted at least half of it over. I knew that Kraut was pretty mad and I thought if he was mad enough maybe I could get him to do something silly, which he did. I mean, it wasn't very smart to run right into a hole in the middle of the yard, was it?"

Littlejohn grinned delightedly. "Oh yeah, and Sarge? Here's your binoculars!"



The End