

THE MAN OR THE MISSION?

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This is the result of a sort of challenge Doc II and I bandied back and forth in a late night IM. I combined the episodes Walk With an Eagle and Dateline. In reality, they aired the opposite way 'round from how I used them, but – hey – it's fanfiction.<G> Writer's prerogative. I never liked the ending of Walk With an Eagle, anyway. Seriously, the pilot learned to ride a motorcycle in the time it took Hanley to get them away from the Germans? I don't think so. ~ Mel

The whole thing had been one big disaster. Such a waste of young lives. All because of some guy's ego and the need to be right. Just because he was a major, and Hanley was a lieutenant. A pissing contest between a flyboy and a dogface, never mind that the flyboy was out of his element. Never mind the guy hadn't been on the ground outside a secure airfield. Never mind that Hanley had worked his way up the ranks since D-Day. A disaster, right from the beginning.

So, that's where Doc was. Up a creek without a paddle. Nothing to do, but lay back, feel the sun warm on his face and try to ignore the burning bullet hole in his leg. Also try to make up his mind whether to stay and wait, or go it on his own. Figures a flyboy major wouldn't know how to drive a motorcycle. He did. Old Tyler down the road had one. Easiest way to get around a farm, Tyler would always say. "Cheaper than a horse, son, 'cause you ain't gotta feed it." Personally, he just thought the old guy liked to be the first one to have whatever newfangled thing came out. The gray-bearded rancher was the only one in the area could afford such improvements.

Never one to turn down a challenge, he'd jumped at the chance to learn to ride it. 'Course, he'd lied to Hanley about being able to ride one. He wasn't stupid. The major was the mission. Hanley had the gun. Besides, what good was a wounded medic, trying to drive a wounded major past German sentries on a motorcycle? No, Hanley was the only choice to get the war hero back to their lines safely. The only choice, if they were to complete their mission. And the mission took priority, even if that mission had been doomed from the beginning.

The warmth of the sun disappeared as a shadow moved over his face. With a sense of dread, he opened his eyes and squinted up at the figure looming above him. This guy was good. Doc hadn't heard a sound. Blue eyes closing in defeat, Doc sighed and slowly pulled his hands from behind his head.

Make that up *shit* creek. And still no paddle.



The roar of the engine made talking nearly impossible. Besides which, trying to avoid the Germans' gunfire had meant Hanley was too busy to hold a conversation even if he'd wanted to. 'Though there were a lot of things he'd like to say. Things he never would say, because the man hunched in pain in the sidecar next to him outranked him. It wouldn't do any good, anyway. Nothing could unmake the



mistakes already made. Wouldn't bring back good men who hadn't deserved to have their lives needlessly thrown away. Wouldn't help the man they'd left behind back on that hill. Surrounded by Germans.

"We'll come back for you, Doc."

Empty words. He had looked into the medic's pale blue eyes and seen the truth reflected back at him. Doc knew as well as he did that the chances of anyone getting back to the medic before he was discovered - well, Hanley wouldn't want to bet his pay on it.

Hanley gripped the handlebars tighter, his long legs tense and his jaw clenched. He leaned forward, as if he could force his upper body to make the motorcycle go faster on the loose dirt road. A good man had stayed behind. Wounded. So that he could get the pilot back to their lines. An ace. A hero flyboy. The lieutenant would rather have Doc's

steady presence at his back any day. But Doc hadn't been the mission. Three men. Two spaces on the motorcycle. He had been forced to choose. Sometimes, he really hated being an officer.

Hazel eyes narrowing in determination, Hanley pushed a little more speed from the German bike. All he could do for the soldier left behind was to try to get back to their lines as fast as he could. And do his damned best to make the truth he'd seen in the medic's face the lie he wanted it to be. Gil Hanley didn't leave a man behind, if he could help it.

Fate has a strange sense of humor sometimes, though.



It felt good to take a few hours rest time. No patrol, no recon. Sergeant Saunders had even managed to sleep until pulled from his bedroll for chow. He and the rest of his squad – the ones not awakened at o'dark-thirty for a recon – got to enjoy a leisurely breakfast that had included actual eggs, then the luxury of a cold shower. Hot water would've been a bit much to ask for. But, as they say, all good things must come to an end.

He'd seen the tall sturdy figure of Captain Jampel coming down the hill and stood to meet him. Rest time was over. Duty called. "Got something for us, Captain?"

Captain Jampel slowed to a stop next to the sergeant and looked at him for a moment, before gesturing to a shaded doorway. Stepping around shattered roof slates, dislodged from the last barrage, Saunders followed him with a sense of trepidation. Something had been in the Captain's eyes just then. Something that didn't bode well for the squad.

"I'd give this to Hanley, Saunders, but-" Captain Jampel pushed his helmet back, the straps swaying from the movement. "The Lieutenant and his squad ran into a bit of trouble."

That sense of foreboding was building. "Trouble, Captain?"

"On the way back from patrol, Lieutenant Hanley and his men were chosen to retrieve a downed flyer. They were the closest patrol in the area. The pilot's a Major, an ace and deemed important for the war effort."

Uh huh. "Is everyone okay, Captain? They find him?" Of course, he knew everyone wasn't okay, or Hanley would be taking whatever it was the Captain was there to hand him. He wasn't so sure he wanted the answer. And what of Doc? Harmon and Palmer?

"I'm afraid not, Saunders. They...ran into a bit of trouble. Hanley sprained his wrist but still managed to drive Major Caldwell back to our lines on a motorbike. Caldwell was wounded as well, but it wasn't too bad."

That silence as the Captain looked back at him, weighing his words, said it all. Saunders broke eye contact for a moment and sighed, shifting his feet. Looking back up to meet the officer's eyes, he cleared his throat. "The men?"

"Doc was shot in the leg. The rest-. I'm afraid the rest of the men were KIA."

Good men. Repple-Depples that had actually had experience. Fine additions to the squad. Harmon and Palmer, gone. Saunders closed his eyes briefly at the thought of the letters Hanley would be writing. He unknowingly echoed Doc's thoughts. *Such a waste of young lives.* Good men, for one officer. Saunders hoped the ace pilot was worth what everyone thought.

"So Doc's gonna be okay?"

"I'm sorry, Saunders. I know what a blow to morale it is to lose a company medic. But the only transportation Hanley had available to him was a German motorbike. It would only hold two. Hanley had to leave him behind."

Sgt. Saunders couldn't believe what he was hearing. Sure, logically he knew the Lieutenant hadn't had a choice. But...Doc. His conscience, as Cajé was his right hand. This must've been what Captain Jampel was coming to him for. To go find their medic and bring him back to the evac hospital.



"Where did they leave him, Captain? Can we get a jeep or do we need to just do this on foot and take a stretcher?"

This time, it was the Captain that sighed. "You're not going back for Doc, Saunders. I came to give you a different assignment."

Not going back? Kirby was going to be difficult to reason with once that bit of news was passed on. With a frown, Saunders rubbed at a bit of sweat trickling down his jaw and scratched at the three day stubble. "Who's going back for him?"

"He's behind enemy lines, Sergeant. We have orders to avoid that area for now. Doc will have to manage to find his own way back." The Captain's look hardened at the expression on the Sergeant's face. "That's the way it is, Sergeant. Now, come with me to my office and I'll brief you on your mission."

Those eggs were starting to sit like a stone in Sgt. Saunders' gut. Doc was wounded, lost behind enemy lines and on his own. And there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.



After his briefing with the captain, Saunders made his way over to the hospital that had been set up in what used to be the village's orphanage. The details of his latest mission swirled in his mind, but he had to simply shake his head at the foolishness of it. At least all they had to do was escort. The rest of the mission was just plain nuts.

A pair of medics, bearing a loaded stretcher, rushed through the doorway, and Saunders turned sideways to avoid them. He stepped close to the wall a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the brightness compared to the twilight outside. After consulting with a nurse, the sergeant made his way upstairs.

He could hear Hanley before he even entered the room, arguing with another nurse. Saunders slipped through the doorway and waited, smiling as the lanky lieutenant lost his battle. He dipped his head politely at the brunette as she passed and shuffled over to sit in a wobbly wooden chair by Hanley's bedside.

"So what's the word, Lieutenant."

Hanley picked at the sling holding his arm to his chest. "Small fracture in my wrist. I'll be out of here tomorrow. Don't know why I can't leave now."

Saunders shrugged and rested his hands on the Tommygun lying across his lap. "Guess they just want to make sure everything heals up right." Meeting the gaze of his lieutenant squarely, Saunders cleared his throat. "How was Doc, before you left? Was he hurt badly?"

This was the moment Hanley had been dreading. When he'd have to look the medic's friends in the face, and remember what he'd had to do.

"It didn't seem too bad. At least, so Doc said. But you know how he can be. He seemed to have the bleeding under control, though. If he can keep hidden, I'm sure he'll be able to hold out until someone can go back for him."

A cold, steely look flashed in Saunders' blue eyes momentarily. "You know as well as I do, Lieutenant, that nobody's going back for him."

A muscle twitched in Hanley's jaw, then he nodded. "You're right, Sergeant. I heard about the orders to stay out of that area. I'm sorry I had to leave him behind, but I had my orders as well."

Sgt. Saunders leaned back in the creaky chair and frowned, though not necessarily at Hanley. "Well, I hope that Major Caldwell was worth the loss of three good men."

"So do I, Sergeant." The words, softly spoken and tinged with regret, came from a man in the bed opposite Hanley's. "Though, from your point of view, I can see how you'd doubt it could be true." His chest was bare except for the cotton bandages wrapped around his torso. This, then, must be the downed pilot. Saunders met his gaze levelly and shrugged. The Major was correct.

"Your medic was, *is*, a good man. He knew what staying behind meant, but insisted I go. I tried to argue with him. With Lieutenant Hanley. But they both have a strong sense of duty. They wouldn't be swayed, so here I am. Hanley would've gladly been the one to stay behind, if we'd had other transportation. I'm sorry things turned out the way they did, Sergeant. You have no idea how sorry I am about that."

The remorse on Major Caldwell's face said everything. The mission hadn't been his idea. He'd simply been the goal. The prize to be returned. The pilot's regret was plain to see. Whatever had

happened, it was in the past. There was nothing to be done about it now. Nothing, except to find his squad and explain to them what had happened to Doc, Harmon and Palmer.

With a weary sigh, Saunders stood and made a sketchy wave to the two recovering officers. "Well, what's done is done as Doc would say. Take it easy on the nurses." A brief smile twitched his lips then disappeared. "I have to go brief the squad."

Saunders took the long way back to their billet to give himself time to arrange his thoughts. When he stepped inside, several heads turned his way. Squaring his shoulders, the sergeant met everyone's eyes for a moment before settling his gaze on Kirby. "We have a new mission. But, first, I have some bad news..."



Wind whistled and rattled the old wooden door of his prison, but Doc ignored it. It had been nearly the longest day of his life. Not as long as D-Day mind you, but pretty close. His captor had hauled him to his feet when he'd been found and sent him stumbling down the hill to a row of waiting German soldiers. They'd looked so much like an execution firing line, he'd nearly thrown up. But that momentary shard of fear had been temporarily removed when they grabbed him and shoved him toward a waiting vehicle.

Stripped of his web belt, helmet, and bag, Doc had been half pushed, half pulled into the waiting transport where he was unceremoniously dumped on the floor. Several of the Germans had climbed up behind him, being sure to trample him on their way to their seats. Apparently, the soldiers had been a little angry at having missed out on capturing their intended prey. A medic was a very poor substitute for an enemy flying ace.

The trip was something Doc would prefer to forget. His leg had throbbed mercilessly and his head pounded at every jarring bump of the transport. When they had finally come to a rattling stop, he was prodded to the edge where a bulky German had put a large hand to his shoulder and, with a wide smile, shoved him out of the back. Hitting the ground was something Doc would prefer to forget.

When he'd opened his eyes, the first thing he had seen was a freshly dug grave. A warning of the future. That shard of fear returned.

The next little while was a blur. An officer had told him if he tried to escape, the next grave would be his own. He had been shown to his new prison, introduced to another inmate and told would be called upon for questions later. *Something to look forward to.*

Now, he closed his eyes and tried to push down the throbbing pain in his leg. Doc knew he was on borrowed time. Once he'd been shown his fellow prisoner, he'd known why he was still alive. The other prisoner was also wounded and showing signs of infection.

Apparently, his fellow inmate was a captured reporter. Someone who spent time with the brass, was privy to certain information. Or so the Germans suspected. They wanted to keep the reporter alive and well until he could be taken to someone with more authority than the officer the medic had met on his arrival. For that, they required Doc's skills and equipment. Now, they wouldn't have to send for a medic of their own. Medics on both sides were in short supply. A lucky capture for the Germans after all. Not so lucky for Doc.

He'd been given his bag back (minus anything remotely sharp or useful for escape) and he'd set to work on both the reporter's wound and his own. He couldn't very well escape, if he ended up weakened by an infection himself.



Robert Barton, War Correspondent, was someone Doc couldn't figure out. It wasn't that he didn't understand the older man. Being captured by the enemy was frightening and demoralizing. Being interrogated was a terrifying experience. One he'd hoped never to repeat, but fate had its own agenda.

Still, it was a soldier's duty to do his best to escape. To get back to his own lines. Not only to save his own life, but to make sure the enemy never got any information out of him.

Maybe it was because Barton was, essentially, a civilian. Granted, Doc was a non-combatant. But he was still a soldier. He'd killed a man in combat. He'd been on the front lines almost since D-Day. He knew what was at stake. But the reporter seemed to think giving up was the only option.

With a sigh of pain, Doc sat up and used a rickety wooden chair to help drag himself to his feet. Limping his way to the back of the barn, the medic found Barton lying listlessly on a pile of old hay. He'd probably get fleas. Doc flapped a hand tiredly. "C'mon. It's time for me to check that bandage."

The reporter glanced up at him, crossed his arms and refused to move. "Just leave me alone. It won't do any good anyway."

Sliding his bag around in front of him, Doc lowered himself to the straw with a painful grunt. "Giving up may be easier, but the outcome won't be. If you put up a fight and try to find a way out of this, you just might have a chance."

"You've been here a few hours, medic. I've seen a guy buried out there in that yard. Helped dig the grave. We ain't going anywhere those Germans don't want us to go. Accept it."

Pulling aside the woolen material of Barton's pants leg to get a look at his handiwork, Doc shook his head. "I don't believe that. I've been in some pretty tough spots before, when it would've been easy to just give up. But I didn't. I got out of those situations and I'll find a way out of this one."

There wasn't any fresh blood showing through the bandage, so Doc nodded in satisfaction and swept his hand around inside his bag for the little bottle of aspirin. He pulled the bottle out, unscrewed the top and tapped out a couple of the small chalky pills. "Here, this will help bring the fever down."

The reporter begrudgingly took the offered pills and choked them down with a sip of water from the medic's canteen. Barton ran a shaky hand through dark hair starting to grey with age and mileage. "You'll leave this place when the Germans take you away, or I end up burying you out there with the other soldier, medic. Now, leave me alone."

Doc replaced the pill bottle in his bag and closed the flap. He was wasting his time with this man, but his own nature made him give it one more try. "You know, I watched a lot of good men die today. To save one man that our brass thought was really important to our side. Maybe they think you're that important, too."

Gripping an old stall board, Doc pulled himself once again to his feet. Shaking his head at the bitter expression of the man lying in the hay, he frowned. "You might feel a little less afraid if you had some faith."

"In what? God?" The reporter rolled onto his side, effectively dismissing Doc.

"In anything." Even as he said it, Doc wondered why he continued to try to get through to the reporter. "I have faith. In God. In my Sergeant, my squad and myself. Even my Lieutenant, who had to leave me behind today. I figure with that kind of faith, one or the other is bound to help me get out of here. Even if it's myself. If you haven't any faith in anyone or anything, there ain't much that's gonna get you out of this mess. And that's why you're so afraid."

With those final words, he limped back over to the main room and slid down against the wall. It was going to be a long night, with an uncertain morrow. Lying back down, Doc used his bag as a pillow and closed his eyes. He sent up a silent prayer that his faith *would* see him through. One way or another.



It had been a long, restless night. As predicted, the squad had been furious at the news that Hanley and his men had been hit so badly just to get one officer back to friendly lines. The loss of all the men was hard, but the loss of their medic was keenly felt. They all knew the odds of Doc making his way back on his own, wounded, were slim to none. The man didn't even carry a weapon to defend himself with. Kirby was practically vibrating with impotent rage, and Saunders worried that the wiry soldier would become a liability on their upcoming mission.

Saunders knew it was the medic's influence that had tempered some of Kirby's natural anger into more productive emotions. How those two had ended up becoming such good friends was something the Sergeant couldn't fathom. Doc could make friends with just about anyone, but Kirby-. Kirby was a harder

nut to crack. The prickly BAR man had gradually let down his guard with the easy-going medic and they'd all seen the improvement in Kirby's attitude and actions.

The sergeant only needed two men for this, plus himself. Caje was still nursing a wound taken a couple of days ago, but Saunders was hesitant to pick Kirby. It wasn't as if he had a lot of choice, and maybe it was better to have Kirby burn his anger out where his sergeant could keep an eye on him. "Kirby, you and Littlejohn are with me on this one."

If Doc moved from the MIA list to the KIA list, Saunders wondered how long it would be before Kirby's anger boiled over. But for now, he had to push it all to the back of his mind. They had a mission. One that was eerily similar to Hanley's. To take his men behind enemy lines and rescue a man. Someone their side felt was important enough to risk more lives to retrieve.

It was the most bizarre thing he'd been ordered to do yet. Go with a captain from G-2, Reardon, and lead him behind the German lines where he would be captured and taken to a temporary prisoner camp. Where, hopefully, the reporter was still being kept. He would make contact with the reporter then lead him out of the camp through a tunnel built by previous prisoners who were transported out before they could use it. The men had escaped during transport and passed on their information to headquarters. Hopefully the information was accurate. It was a lot to pin their hopes on.

Saunders hoped he had better luck than the Lieutenant.



The escort patrol handed to Saunders and his men couldn't have ended any worse. The man they were to see "safely" captured by the Germans was dead. Bad luck seemed to be dogging their platoon lately. Sgt. Saunders had a few seconds to make a decision, and he hoped he'd made the right one.

Captain Reardon had been blown nearly in half by a landmine. Saunders, Littlejohn and Kirby found themselves surrounded and pinned down by Germans with nowhere to go. Still, they kept firing until they ran out of ammo. Looking into the hopeful faces of his men, Saunders shook his head. They had no choice now, but to complete their mission. Raising his hands, dropping his Tommygun to the side, Saunders slowly stood.

He and his men would be taking Reardon's place. They had all the information they needed to see it through. Except the small, minor detail of the location of the escape tunnel that is. Surely it wouldn't be that hard to find. He was betting the lives of his men on that fact. He couldn't lose. Wouldn't lose.



The march to the temporary prison camp was a long one, with several hard stares at Saunders' back. And at least one angry glare beside him. He knew Kirby wasn't so keen to gamble his life for a reporter they'd never met. Sergeant Saunders' blue eyes swept the area as they approached the gates, his breath curling into the chill of the evening. He had a better understanding of Hanley's decision now. Risking the lives of good men-men he'd gone to battle with-for that of a stranger.

A creak and rattle drew his attention back to the barbed wire gates as they swung open and the squad was shoved through. A fresh-looking grave was a macabre scene on their right. No doubt a warning for those who entered that they could expect the same if foolish enough to defy their captors. Saunders didn't scare very easily. He ran a hand through his hair, feeling the sweat cold against his scalp. He sincerely hoped the reporter wasn't in one of those graves.

A German officer, a Major Mueller, approached the three men and barked a quick order to the guards, who roughly untied the American's hands. His dark eyes were cold, a hearing aid trailing a wire from his left ear. They got the typical speech about obeying their guards and that escape was futile. Orders Sgt. Saunders had every intention of disobeying.

Having been stripped of their jackets, the night air was starting to chill the sergeant's arms. He resisted the temptation to rub them for warmth and stared impassively back at the German major until he and his men were dismissed, to be pushed and shoved toward what looked like an old barn.

An iron bolt was pulled back, a hand shoved the small of his back, and Saunders stumbled inside. Littlejohn and Kirby bumped into him from behind as they were given the same treatment. The door was slammed shut and the sound of the bolt sliding closed clicked behind them.

Sgt. Saunders' eyes adjusted to the dim light of the old wooden structure as they focused on a figure sitting up from the floor. Surely his eyes were playing tricks on him.

"Doc?"

"Hey! Barton, I told you to have faith. Look, it's my Sergeant." The missing medic sat on the dirty wood floor, laughing quietly and shaking his head.

Saunders reached down and grabbed Doc's hand to pull him up. Other than the bandage on the medic's leg and a few fresh-looking bruises, the medic seemed in pretty good shape.

Kirby took Doc's arm to help the medic get his balance. "Boy, are you a sight for sore eyes, Doc. We thought for sure you were a goner. Not that I was worried any, you understand. I knew you'd turn up, like a bad penny."

The corner of Doc's mouth quirked up in a half smile. Kirby could talk a good act, but the medic saw the genuine concern there. "Well, Kirby, it seems it's you who's the bad penny. I was just sittin' here minding my own business when you showed up."

Interrupting banter that Saunders knew could go on for ages, the sergeant took Doc's weight from Kirby. "You said the name Barton. Is Robert Barton in here?"

"He's over there in one of those stalls, Sarge. He's got a leg wound, too. I've done the best I can. At least that Major lets me give him morphine. How'd you know he was here? How did you know where to find me, anyway?"

Helping the medic over to the stall, Saunders let Doc balance himself then dropped to a crouch next to the sleeping reporter. "We didn't know you were here, Doc. We came here for Barton. We were just supposed to escort a guy from G-2 to come get this guy, but he got killed. We got caught. Now it's up to us to get this guy back to Headquarters."

Shifting his weight, grimacing at the stretch and pull of his wound, Doc frowned at his sergeant. "How're you figuring to do that, Sarge?"

Smiling, Saunders stood and glanced at the three soldiers gazing back at him, trust and faith on their dirt-streaked faces. "Well, Doc. Seems there's an escape tunnel here somewhere. All we have to do is find it."

Saunders had all the faith in the world they would find it. If they could somehow stumble across their missing medic, against all odds, surely something as simple as an escape route would be child's play. They would get both wounded men out and back to their own lines. Nothing else would be acceptable. Wouldn't Hanley and a certain flying ace be surprised when they brought Doc into the evac? The look on the lieutenant's face, alone, would be worth everything.

Doc shifted, leaning his hip against the worn wooden slats of the stall. His face was etched with pain and weariness, yet he smiled like he'd heard the war had ended. "I told Barton to have faith, Sarge. All a man needs to get through a rough patch is faith. And maybe a fair bit of luck."

Maybe their luck was changing. A bad couple of days were behind them. Morning would hopefully find them all safely inside American lines. A chance to start over and celebrate the return of a friend and brother. Hanley could let go of his ill-placed guilt. Major Caldwell could mark a name off the list of men who died to save his life. Yep, just like Doc said. Faith and a fair bit of luck. It's all they needed.



The End