

MUDSUCKER

By: Ranger



It was the sucking. It was the sounds of the mud sucking the will to move forward. With every agonizing step the trio willed their legs to move forward. Sucking the steamy muggy air into their lungs with each strenuous step. Each gulp of air brought in another nauseous smell of the dead, the dying, the acrid smell of war.

The lieutenant teetered between two of the soldiers. Desperately, he attempted to keep his gangly legs in tune with the others. It was hard work indeed to keep up with them. But the lieutenant had no choice as they valiantly tried to whisk him along.

The loss of blood was worrisome to the medic. He so wanted to halt this slow progression they were making to check on Hanley. The ire of the sergeant the last time he had asked made Doc hesitant about asking again.

Tactfully, the medic asked the question he'd been holding back. "Sarge. Can't we stop for a minute? We need to take a break. I need to check the lieutenant's bandage." Looking over to the exhausted Sergeant Saunders, he quickly added, "You need to rest too."

"Can't afford to, Doc. Not now. Any minute they'll be right behind us. That barrage was just the beginning. You know that."

"But, Sarge. We can't keep going at this pace."

"We don't keep going, we won't have to worry about it. Now let's go."

Doc shook his head. He had tried. He looked wistfully at a patch of less muddy ground under a grove of leafy trees as they continued to pull their boots through the sole grabbing mud.

The storm didn't let up and neither did the gunfire. Saunders grabbed a look behind them. Off in the distance, he could see a line of blue-gray uniforms slinking through the misty rain curtain. Brilliant shards of light emitted from their weapons as they made sure all were dead on the field of mud and blood.

"Doc. Over this way. Come on, let's go. They're right behind us."

The medic hitched up his shoulder, positioning the lieutenant higher. Sarge and Doc struggled to make their legs work harder to overcome the powerful boot grabbing soil that imitated quicksand.

The agonizing ordeal had started twenty-four hours earlier when the battalion had been sent to a forward operation and had been caught in the open. For hours it sounded like a Fourth of July fireworks display gone awry. But it wasn't a display, it was war, and this was a battle gone awry.

Saunders' brain was wracked with the images of buddies lost, torn apart by the unrelenting volleys of 88's. Dolan, Clancy, Shimkus, Henderson. No longer alive now, just names. Names that would be on roll call plaques overlooking town commons some day. And then there was the newest and youngest in his squad, eighteen-year-old Howard Rance. He had just joined the squad less than two days ago.

His squad! He wistfully remembered sending them in retreat after Hanley had called for it. Moving swiftly, Caje at point, Littlejohn, Nelson, Doc, and Wilson followed by Kirby. The retreat had all seemed so easy at the time. Everything seemed to be going right. That is until they had reached third squad and the lieutenant. They'd been hit hard by a blast.

They had found the lieutenant under Dolan's body. Or what had been left of it. Hanley had suffered shrapnel wounds to the shoulder. Too many and too little time to



take them out. Doc had wrapped the injury the best he could.

It was then that Sarge had told the others to head out as he and the medic climbed out of the foxhole clutching a faltering Hanley. "Go, go, go!" Sarge yelled over the roar. His men had hesitated a second, unsure whether to stay or go. ***Loyalty would have gotten them killed or maimed***, thought the sergeant.

That left Doc and him with the responsibility of getting their lieutenant to safety. With the Germans close on their heels, it was getting tougher every minute. The soaking rains creating misty shields protected the group from the enemy but pre-empted them from visually seeking safe shelter.

Saunders turned another time and didn't see any rifle fire or men chasing them. All he heard now was the squishing of their boots and the pelting of the rain on the barrel of his Thompson and on their helmets. Drenched to the bone and weary from twenty-four hours of fighting Saunders felt nearly defeated and ready to give up.

The fields and pastures that were trying to hold their feet in place were giving way to scatterings of trees and hedgerows. Saunders surveyed the area. "Doc. This way."

Doc nodded and gripped Hanley tighter. The man was fading fast and needed serious medical attention.

Sergeant Saunders slung the lieutenant's arm around his neck and headed off toward the thickest grove of trees he could see through the blinding rainstorm. The footing began to swing from mud sucking to mud slipping as they headed for a safe haven.

Saunders motioned to Doc to slide Hanley to the ground. Using hand signals he motioned to the medic he was going ahead to check out the grove of trees. If it was good enough for them it may be good enough for others.

Doc nodded. Saunders was only about ten feet gone and Doc once again took on his role as medic. Assessing the injuries, he pulled out more bandages and another sulfa pack. Doc managed to find another wound that he hadn't discovered before. Just below the ear was a good-sized lump and a piece of shrapnel protruding. Gently, he probed it. ***Hmm, maybe I can get this one out myself once we find a safe hideout.***

A woozy Hanley started to move. "Doc. How bad is it? The others? They get out?"

"Take it easy, Lieutenant. Don't try to move." The medic had to put his hand on Hanley's chest to set him back in a position not to reopen any of the newly bandaged injuries.

"Sarge is checking out a place for us. Third squad got it pretty good. Most of our squad headed out in retreat ahead of us."

"Why didn't you just leave me and get out yourselves?"

"Couldn't do that, Lieutenant."

"Should have."

The medic shoved his hand across Hanley's mouth when he heard squeaky footsteps approaching. A minute later Sergeant Saunders appeared through the rainshield.

"Looks good. Let's move out."

Saunders reached down to help Doc pick up the lieutenant.

"Sergeant, you should have left me there." Hanley weakly tried to help the two of them lift him up but he slipped in the process but not before the two of them caught him.

It was probably another twenty minutes walking and slipping on the wet ground before they reached the grove of trees. Saunders had scouted out this area earlier and had time to gather some boughs to build a makeshift shelter for Hanley.

Tired, stiff, wet, and now cold as evening approached, Saunders and Doc

snugged Hanley into the shelter.

"Doc, I'm going to take a look around. Get my bearings. I'll be back in a bit. See what you can do for him."

"Saunders, leave me here and head out. I'll be fine till you come back."

"No way, Lieutenant."

Saunders surveyed their protective hovel from the war. The grove was thick with boughs that swagged down to the earth. On the eastern border were canes of berry bushes. They were thick enough that only rabbits could get through. On the south border they would be safe from attack as thorny shrubs entangled the lower branches of the softwoods. That left the west from whence they had just arrived. The north border of the grove was the most exposed. Those trees must have seen some severe storms at times as several large limbs lay on the ground on the northern edge.

Satisfied that no one had followed them and that they had enough protection, he knelt beside the lieutenant. Striking a match to the Lucky Strike he had dangling from his mouth, he now offered it to Hanley.

Doc jumped on the idea of a fire. "Sarge. Can I start a small fire? I think I can get some of the smaller shrapnel out with my knife. It would also help warm him up from the blood loss he's suffered."

"Okay, Doc. Just keep it small."

Doc gave Hanley a shot of morphine for the small operation he was about to perform. The fire lit, his knife heated, the medic began with the small piece of shrapnel below the ear. **Whew, it was small.**

He pulled out a few other fragments. The ones in the shoulder would have to stay for now. At least until the lieutenant to a field hospital.

In the light of the fire, Doc took stock of what was left in his meagerly supplied rucksack. He shook his head as he saw there was little remaining. He hoped that Saunders would find a quick way home.

Doc took out two cans of K-rations and attempted to heat them up a bit by the little fire. He had about finished one can when Hanley began to moan and move slightly.

"Hold on, Lieutenant. You're not going anywhere. You might be a bit sore too. Took some of those fragments out."

"Where's Saunders?"

"He'll be back. He's checking out the area and his map. Here, have something to eat and drink." The medic helped Hanley sit up a bit and handed him a canteen. Then gave him the second heated K-ration.

Saunders came trotting back in from the north. Squatting next to Doc and Hanley he asked, "How you doing, Lieutenant?"

"Not bad, Sergeant. Think I'll go dancing with Marie tomorrow when we get back." Hanley tried a smile but even that brought wincing pain across his face.

Saunders slapped him on the knee. "See you haven't changed much since your sergeant days."

Hanley tried to repress a laugh, as he knew it would inflict more pain.

"Doc, I checked out the area. I think we're about four miles southwest of headquarters." **If it's still there.**

"I figure first light we should head out. I'll take first watch. Why don't you catch some sleep."

Knowing it was probably useless to even suggest it, Doc went ahead anyhow.

"Why don't I take first watch and you catch something to eat and some sleep next to the fire."

"Sounds good Doc but no go."

A couple of hours later the medic felt a tap on his shoulder and a hand over his

mouth. Saunders had kicked out the dying fire. He pointed over toward the exposed north side of the grove. Raising his Thompson, Saunders was ready for a fight, but not knowing whom the enemy is or how many were out there, was cautious not to be the first to fire a shot.

Doc lowered himself to the ground but kept an eye on the still sleeping lieutenant and the other on the northern approach.

Saunders crawled forward in the soggy needles of the pines. The dampness kept the noises down. A twig snapped and everyone came to a momentary stop. Saunders looked back toward where he had left Doc and Hanley. They were deep within the boughs and not visible. **Good!**

He began his slow tireless push along the ground. Carefully, he carried the Thompson resting across his arms but his fingers held tentatively to the trigger. He wasn't about to give the newcomers the upper hand.

Entering the grove were two young soldiers. With the darkness still surrounding the grove and the mist of rain still saturating the area, it was hard to tell if it was friend or foe. Saunders waited. Neither soldiers were talking at this point.

Sergeant Saunders continued to watch and listen to the two soldiers. Then a voice from outside the grove rasped through the air. Saunders strained to make out what they were saying. **German.**

Saunders froze where he was. **Would more enter the grove?** He waited. The two soldiers didn't move in any further than where they had been standing. The voice outside the ring of trees hollered in once more. Saunders lay prone waiting for their approach, but upon hearing the second call, the two soldiers shook their heads and headed out of the pines.

The sergeant continued to quietly crawl his way to the opening. He made it in time to see a patrol of eight Germans headed toward the south. **South. Hope they keep heading that way and don't turn west.**



Saunders stayed by the opening for a while, making sure no other patrols came along. Soon he could see dawn breaking toward the east. The rain had eased up and the sky looked promising for no more rain. The sergeant scurried back to where Doc and Hanley lay.

"It's clear. We have to get going if we want to make it back. How is he Doc?"

"Seems a bit more alert but we still need to get him back soon and not jostle him too much."

"Okay, saddle up, Lieutenant. Time to go."

The medic and the sergeant reached down and pulled Hanley up and began the long trek back to Headquarters.

Under the cover of the gray dawn, the trio began moving through more hedgerows and fields. Sticking close to the edges, a weary sergeant led the way. The sun broke through the thick gray clouds of the receding rainstorm and showered the fields a like a wet golden kiss.

Saunders found a small ridge marked by several boulders just high enough to check out points on his map to calculate their whereabouts. Doc checked and rechecked Hanley's bandages.

"Must be a mile and half left. If I'm right it should be just over that hill on the horizon."

The medic stared at field after field broken by a stone wall or hedges. "That's still a lot of territory, Sarge."

"Yep. So lets get going."

Another long forty-five minutes passed and they had to stop for a rest. Saunders checked his map once again. "Almost there, Doc."

They had just picked up Hanley and were about to take their first steps when all of a sudden a shot whizzed by Saunders ear. "Hit it!"

Doc melted down to the ground with Hanley and pushed as best he could to pocket Hanley in the small curve of the boulder next to them. Saunders wheeled away from the two, firing the Thompson at the assailants.

Poking his head around the rock he had landed against, Saunders noticed that it was the patrol of eight Germans that had nearly invaded the thicket of trees earlier. They must have been doing perimeter lines and now the opposing soldiers had interconnected once again.

Saunders fired off the rest of his clip. He saw one soldier grab his arm and the other fall flat to the ground. He grabbed another clip from his jacket pocket. ***Last one, got to make this one count.***

Saunders concentrated on the rocks at the ridge they were on. ***If he could move to the one on his right, he might be able to lead the patrol away from the lieutenant and Doc.*** Saunders sprang from his position and bolted for the rock he'd chosen. He had just about made it when a rifle shot managed to hit him in the shoulder.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the medic was about to launch himself at his position. Saunders held his good hand up to hold him back. Reluctantly, Doc slid back down to Hanley's side.

Saunders slathered a bandage on his bleeding arm and then painfully lifted the heavy Thompson. Leaning it on the rock for balance, he began to take as careful an aim as the weapon would let him. Another German went down. But five more were healthy. ***Healthier than him.***

This wasn't the perfect situation but he would try to make the best of it. He still had his .45 on his hip and what was left in the clip for the Thompson. ***Maybe he could hold up. Maybe Headquarters would be sending out a patrol of their own.***

As Saunders continued to shoot, he began to hear other small arms fire. It was coming from a different direction than the Germans and it was the sound of M1s and Garands. Then he heard the steady staccato of the BAR.

The sergeant levied another shot down from the ridge, catching another German as they ran from the Americans.

Soon he heard the calls from below, hailing them.

"Yo, you up there. You okay?"

Such a familiar voice. Usually the sergeant would have been mad listening to that voice at times, but this time it was a sweet sound.

"Kirby. We need some help up here. Doc says the lieutenant needs a stretcher."

"Sarge? That you, Sarge?"

"Yea, Kirby, it's me."

"Hey guys. It's the Sarge and he's got Doc and the lieutenant with him."

With a huge grin on his face, Kirby yelled back up the slope, "We'll be right there Sarge. Hang on."

Soon other medics had taken over for Doc. They placed Hanley on a stretcher and carried him down to the waiting ambulance. Another medic was tending to Saunders's arm. He kept waving them away but they were just as insistent as his own medic was.

Caje, Littlejohn, and Kirby had all pulled out cigarettes, watching with merriment

the beleaguered sergeant trying to fend off the medics. Nelson was asking Saunders a thousand questions.

Looking up at Doc, Sarge asked, "You have an aspirin on you?"

Doc handed him one and all broke into laughter as Nelson continued to hammer away with questions. Doc and the medic hoisted the sergeant to his feet and all headed back to Headquarters.

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