

Letters from the Front

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Author's note: This story continues after the episode, The Letter and is also connected to another story that I have written, The Long Watch. When composing that particular story, and this one, I had not seen The Letter in a very long time, and had utterly forgotten that a photograph of 'Chris Saunders' appeared in it. Therefore, my idea of what he looks like differs greatly from that given in the series. While compiling notes for my own arch of stories, I had produced a 'family tree' for the character of Chip Saunders. In it, I utilized images of various actors to 'fit the roles' as it were. Russell Crowe and Sean Astin are my images of 'Joey' and 'Chris'. I don't expect anyone to agree with those choices, but it's my imaginings and this is, after all, only fiction. Likewise, if any details contained in this story are not in agreement with historical fact, then I offer my apologies. Again, this is only fiction --- and if memory serves correct, in the scheme of Combat!, the 361st is also fictional, so I rest my case. I hope this story is enjoyable to those who read it and that they find the characters, their experiences and emotions believable according to the circumstances I have, in part, created.

Acknowledgments: To my friends Doc II and Sandy Williams -- once again your editing skills have helped me bring another idea to fruition. Thanks for all the help, confidence and support you have so freely given to me while I spun this tale and came up with ideas for continuing story lines connected to it. That said, I hope you have a shovel and plenty of rations because you're both coming into my foxhole to help me create those upcoming stories!

This story is dedicated to the memory of Vic Morrow, whose portrayal of Sergeant Chip Saunders is as unforgettable as it is everlasting.

August, 1944

The heat was stifling. The wounded soldiers who were not confined to their cots at the field hospital retreated outside into the shade of the surrounding trees. With a pad of paper resting on one knee, Chip Saunders sat with his right leg propped as comfortably as he could make it. The bullet wound wasn't serious, but it was going to keep him off the line for a few days. A brief outburst of laughter caused his gaze to travel a few yards away; Private Hummel, his left arm held in a sling, talked with another GI from Item Company. They spoke of home -- but where they came from was also the platoon they had been assigned to since arriving on the front. They spoke of family -- but now they also belonged to a lineage measured in deeds and tempered by blood. Saunders let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. His gaze returned to the pad of paper and he focused again on the letter he had been struggling to write.

Dear Chris,

Our platoon's seen a lot of hard action lately and there hasn't been much of a let up. Sometimes it's hard to know what day of the week it is, they all seem to run together most of the time. I know that you've heard me say that before, but now, it seems you really need to know it. You don't get much down time out here, but I've got a little right now so I might as well take advantage of it. This might be the longest letter you ever get from me, and I hope you're able to read it all, what with mail being censored so much. Anyway, I've got some things to tell you, so listen up.

I got your letter yesterday. The news about you dropping out of school and enlisting in the service really threw me for loop, kid. I know you don't want me to be angry with you, but even though I understand why you did it, you still should have finished your senior year. It's bad enough I dropped out, but the circumstances were different. Times were rough, money was real tight, and after Dad was killed, it got worse. I'm not saying we had things harder than anyone else, everyone was struggling to make ends meet. You and Louise were too little to understand everything then and Mom wanted us to have things as normal as she could make it. But at the time, I knew that wasn't possible. You and Joey and I had the paper route, and we had our other odd jobs too, but it wasn't enough. We needed the added income if I went to work full time. I tried to stick it out, working more part time hours after classes and on weekends, but during my junior year, I dropped out after the fall semester was over. Mom begged me not to. She said we'd just tighten our belts a bit more and water down the soup so to speak, but I just couldn't stand it any more that she was working all those late hours, wearing herself out while she was still trying to take care of all of us too. You and Louise never knew that because Mom would never let on how tired she was, or how much she missed Dad, or how much she just wanted things to be the way they should have been. You never knew this either, nobody but me ever did until now, not even Pops and nothing ever seemed to escape him -- Joey almost dropped out of school not longer after I did. The only reason he changed his mind was because I convinced him how heartbroken Mom would be if he went through with it. I know you think I'm giving you a sermon about all of this, I don't mean to and I'm sorry if it sounds like I am, because I know that's not what you want to hear, especially from me. But Chris, you're my brother and I know how much it means to Mom, and Dad too if he were still with us, that we all got a High School diploma. I promised Mom that some day I'd go take night classes and get mine. I want to, if for no other reason than to make her happy. And don't think for a minute that you're

going to weasel out of going back; I've written to Mom and promised her that you'll go if I have to drag you by the ears, so just be ready to do it, okay?

You mentioned in your letter that Charlie Thompson got a medal over in the Pacific. I don't mean to knock anybody, but medals don't make heroes, Chris. There's a lot of guys fighting this war that have no medals at all to show for the brave things they've done and the ones that do, well, you won't hear them talk about it much or even at all. All of us are just doing the job we were sent here to do. We all want to win this war and get home in one piece. I guess I could say a lot more, write it out a lot better than I'm doing now, but I just don't have the words, so I'll just say these things the best way I can and hope that it'll be good enough.

Listen Chris, no stories you heard back home are ever going to prepare you for what war is really like. It can't. Just pay attention to details and follow orders. You're smart and I know you'll learn what they have to teach you in basic, but just take it from your big brother, trust your leaders and the rest of the guys that have lived long enough out here to teach you some things. And trust yourself too. That was one of the things Mom and Dad included in our 'Saunders House Rules', remember? Man! I never thought that one rule would have as much meaning as it does now. Trust is priceless here, Chris and it can keep you alive. You're going to face so much once you've hit the front lines. You'll learn lessons no book or reel of film can ever teach you. What you'll go through will be more than anything you could ever dream up. I'd be lying if I told you any different, and maybe by the time you're reading this, you already know what I'm taking about. It's just that I know how hard it is to get through a lot things, especially in combat, so I don't want you to be scared to admit that you're afraid -- We're all afraid, kid, and that's nothing to be ashamed of. Anybody who tells you different is full of crap. You want to know something? A long while back, I got a letter from Joey -- he told me he was scared. You're probably thinking, 'Not Joey. He's never afraid of anything'. But it's true. He was scared. I've been scared too and I know you won't want to believe that either. Chris, you'll find out that there's going to be things you'll have to do, stuff that's going to test everything you believe in. But you'll do them. Every soldier does. We just do what we have to do and we carry on. Every guy fighting this war is part of the same brotherhood. We never asked to be a part of it, but that's just the way it is. I don't doubt that you'll do your best. That's what Mom, Dad and the rest of the family always taught us. Maybe I played a little part in that too after Dad was gone. Least ways, I hope I did. I tried to do my best with helping to raise you and Joey and Louise. I know you want me to be proud of you but you didn't have to get into this war for that. You're my brother, and a part of me, how could I be anything but proud of you? Even if you do need a swift kick in the pants once in a while! I wish I could be right there with you, to see you through all the rough spots ahead. The one thing in this world I don't want, other than the possibility of me and Joey not making it home, is you risking your life too. I'm sorry if I sound like I'm coming down on you with a lot of crap. Try to understand, I wanted you to be safe. I wish there was some way I could keep you from experiencing the same things that Joey and I have been through, stuff that we still go through almost every day. There's no glory in war, kid and you'll know what I mean soon enough. Listen, I know I never said it much back home, you know me, not much for saying certain things, but I love you, Chris. So be careful, huh? Hey, you never know, maybe we'll meet up somewhere. If we do, you can buy your big brother a cold beer, and agree with me every time I tell you, 'I told you so'!

Hey, I just heard they're taking up mail to go out, and since I want to get this off to you as soon as possible, I'll sign off for now. I promise I'll write as often as I can and you do the same, huh? And be sure you write to Mom and Louise whenever you get a free moment. With all three of us boys gone now, it's going to be even more important

that they hear from us, just as much as we need to hear from them. If you haven't shipped out from the States when you get this, call home for me, will you? Tell Mom and Louise that I love them and miss them a lot.

Take care,

Chip

PS: Bet you're just going to love canned ham and eggs!

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August, 1944

The barracks were quiet. 'Lights Out' was only a few minutes away; most of the recruits spent their last moments awake quietly writing or reading letters. Chris Saunders glanced at the two photographs he held in his left hand. One was a picture of his family, taken nearly three years ago, before either of his brothers had left home. The other photograph was recent, taken only a couple of months ago. Chris barely recognized his eldest brother. Chip and a little band of GI's from his squad were gathered together in the ruins of some town.

Like the other men in the picture, Chip looked grimy, rough, in need a shower, a shave and a clean uniform. And like the other men, he had the unmistakable look of a seasoned soldier, living on the edge of death every day. To Chris the image was surreal. He barely recognized his brother from the young man in the family photograph -- but the smile, though weary, was unmistakable. The thought occurred to him that if he came face-to-face with either Chip, or Joey, he might not realize who they were. But they were his brothers, he quickly reminded himself. And he trusted that no matter what, they would know one another anywhere. Placing the photos beside his tablet of writing paper, Chris picked up the engraved mechanical pencil his sister had given him as a farewell gift the night before he'd left home. He glanced at the wall clock at the far end of the rectangular room; there wouldn't be much time to write a letter now, so he began with the one that compelled him the most.



Dear Chip,

Guess what? I've been accepted for corpsman training! They were asking for volunteers and, well, I remember how Mom and everybody always told us we'd know if something was right or not, and how you said it too, later on after Dad died. I just know that being a medic is the right thing for me to do. It's not that I'd be unable to pick up a weapon and defend someone, or myself, if it came down to it, but everything about this, well, it's just right for me. I know it's not going to be an easy job, and like you said,

there'll be things that are going to be hard to get through, but I'll just remember the stuff you told me and I'll be okay.

Hey, I got a few letters from home. Mom's doing fine. She said Louise was really down for a few weeks after I left. Can you believe it, The Brat being so quiet? But come to think of it, she was that way when you and Joey left home too. Judging by the letter I got from Pops, my leaving hit her and Mom harder than either of them let on. It doesn't surprise me though. Especially with Mom. You know how she is, always keeping her chin up and not letting on that anything is ever as bad as it can get. And Sis, well, she's pretty strong too, come to think of it. I never knew how much I'd miss her, but I do. Ya know, I think Louise deserves a lot of credit for keeping things cheerful at home. I never saw that in her before, she always seemed to be poking her nose into all of my business, but now that I think on it, she and I were closer than I realized. Maybe that's because being the two youngest out of us kids, her and me just stuck together a lot. Still, you've always been real special to her. Maybe because, even though she was a brat, you were always patient with her and laughed at all of her corny jokes and stuff and sang every silly song with her that she was hooked on at one time or another. Just so you know it, Chip, she's never forgotten any of that. Anyway, now that I'm away, I appreciate her more than I used to. She's like Joey in a way, always making people smile. She thinks it's great that I'm going to be a medic. Would you believe she even sent me an old photo that Dad took one time – we'd all been playing cowboys and Indians or something, and we pretended that Jack got wounded saving us, remember? Boy! I'll never forget how mad Mom got when she saw I'd swiped those clean towels off the clothes line to use for pretend bandages on that dog! Do you remember that? Anyway, I can't believe Louise had that photo. But that's our crazy little sister. I really miss her. Oh, before I forget it, I'm enclosing that photo. Pass it on to Joey, okay?



Well, it's time to hit the sack. I'll write again soon as I get a chance. Hey, I haven't heard from Joey since last month. I know letters can take a long time getting to him over there in the Pacific, so if you don't mind, next time you write to him bring him up to date on what I'm doing. That way, between you and everyone back home, he's sure to get the news about my becoming a corpsman.

Take care of yourself big brother.

Chris

September, 1944

The rain drove down in hard, torrential sheets. King Company's second platoon had secured a village, one that's name sounded like a dozen others for men too fatigued to commit them to memory. In what had been a cobbler's shop, First Squad settled in for the night. Haggard, exhausted, mud splattered and soaked through to the skin they wasted no time in gaining what was likely to be only a few precious hours of sleep -- if they even got that much. Their sergeant had just returned from reporting in to platoon

HQ. Practically out on his feet, he remained awake -- at least for now -- ignoring the somber glance of 'Doc' Carter, the squad's medic.

The NCO took his camo-covered helmet off and it clunked atop the worn surface of a wooden workbench. His eyes almost drifted shut as he laid his Thompson down next to the helmet but he mentally shook himself awake and shrugged out of his rain poncho. "Don't fret Doc," he said to the medic. "I'll get some sleep in a few minutes."

The corpsman had heard that before. His soft Arkansas accent did not conceal his concern. "Yeah," he huffed sarcastically, "Well, 'a few minutes' might be all you'll get the way things've been goin' lately."

"So what's new?" Knowing Carter wouldn't let up, Saunders acquiesced with a sigh. "Like I said, Doc, I'll get some rest. I promise."

Carter rolled onto one elbow and gave him a half-hearted grin. "If I b'lieve that, then I'll sell ya some beach front property in Fayetteville."

Saunders gave the other man a dubious look. "I've been to the beach, back in June. I didn't like it."

His facetious comment was met with a dry chuckle. "Yeah, me either." Carter

rested his head back against his rucksack and closed his eyes. "Hey, whoever worked here," he said against a wide yawn, "musta' lived here too. There's a kitchen in the back. I put some coffee on while you were checking in with Hanley. There's still some left."

"Thanks Doc." The soles of the NCO's boots scuffed against the wooden planks of the floor as he made his way to the back of the shop.

"Don't thank me yet. You hadn't tasted it."

The night passed slowly; the rain still came down.

Saunders' shoulders made a cracking noise as he rolled them in an effort to ease the stiffness

that had settled there days ago. Or was it weeks? He couldn't remember. Early after his enlistment into the service, he had learned to sleep anywhere. And at any time. Usually. But this night, despite the consuming fatigue that dragged at his every joint and muscle, and beyond what remained of his best efforts to get some rest, sleep eluded him. Letting out a disgruntled sigh, he pulled the pack of Lucky Strikes from his jacket pocket, only to discover that the one cigarette remaining was now a sodden mash of shredded paper and bits of ruined tobacco. Totally disgusted, he swore between clenched teeth as he curled his fist around the pack and tossed it away. He closed his bloodshot eyes for a moment. They felt gritty, like sawdust over fine linen and he rubbed the calloused heels of his palms against them. *God. If I could just sleep for a little while...* Resigning himself to the knowledge that that wouldn't happen any time soon, he reached into his rucksack and pulled out his rumpled tablet of paper. Had he not been far too exhausted to do so, he would have laughed when he saw it; unlike his last cigarette, the tablet remained



totally dry and the letter he'd started a week ago to his youngest brother was perfectly intact. A smile fraught with weariness creased against the mud and stubble on his face and pinched the raw scrapes marring his left cheek bone. Ignoring his discomfort, his exhaustion, he searched his pockets for something to write with.

Hiya Chris

This is going to be short. We've been on the move for several days with no let up. Our medic's been giving me the third degree about catching some sleep. I told him I'd write my congressman about that and he handed me a pencil! I couldn't help but laugh. But that's Doc Carter. He knows exactly what we need when we need it. He's a mother hen sometimes, but only when he has to be. I guess if he heard me say that he'd tell me I'm just as guilty of that too in my own way. But don't tell anyone I said that, okay?

Man, it's been raining cats and dogs for the last week and I feel like I'm never going to be dry again. But enough of that. You don't need to hear me belly aching about the weather. It's the weather, so what can anyone do about it, huh? So --- damn! 88's are coming in, gotta go ---

--- Hey, sorry I had to stop before. Things suddenly got busy and now it's nearly a week since I started writing this. I meant to have it mailed to you by now but, well, you know how that goes.

So, my little brother's going to be a corpsman! I think it suits you. You'll be just as good as Doc Carter, I'll bet, and he's as good as they come. God knows he gets his share of this war and on top of that, he also gets the guys laying their crappy troubles on his doorstep. I'm surprised they don't nickname him 'Chaplin'! But he never minds hearing what anyone's got to say. He just takes it all in stride. I swear the man has the patience of a saint -- well, most of the time anyway. He's also one of the bravest men I know. It takes a lot of guts to be a medic, especially out here on the front lines, but I know you'll do fine. I'm real proud of you, Chris. I wish like hell that I could say that in person to you -- it would mean a lot to both of us. Maybe this war will be over soon and I'll get that chance before you know it. I sure hope so. It would be good see you after so long.

Hey, I got that photo of you and Jack! It sure brought back a lot of good memories. Guess I'll have to start calling you a 'mother hen' too, because sending that picture to me, well, I really needed something like that, so thanks. I sent it on to Joey so he can get a laugh out of it too. And don't worry if you haven't heard from him yet. I got a letter from him the other day that was over six weeks old. You'll get used to that if you haven't already. Just because you're in the service doesn't mean the mail gets delivered faster than it did back home! Go figure, huh?

Well listen, I can hardly keep my eyes open right now, but I wanted to finish this up first. We've got to go on patrol in a couple of hours, so I'm going to catch a little shuteye while I can.

Keep your head down, kiddo.

Chip

October, 1944

The foxhole was damp and the young corpsman's breath froze on the predawn air. For the first time in more hours than he remembered, it was finally quiet. The smoke left from the last barrage burned against his eyes, and the chill air stung his lungs. Chris Saunders couldn't recall a time when he'd been more bone weary or missed his home and family more than at that very moment. The noise from the shelling and the constant firefights echoed inside his head until he thought he could hear nothing else. But over the bone pounding, ear shattering din of it all, he had heard the cries of the wounded and swallowed his fear in order to do his job. He had done what his brother had reminded him to do; he had trusted himself. Somewhere, amidst the overwhelming fatigue that threatened to hold him to the ground and crush him, against the nightmarish noise that still rang in his brain, he thought he heard his brother's voice telling him, *You're doin' okay, kid*. He opened his eyes suddenly then, and realized he'd dozed off and that the voice wasn't Chip's, but rather that of his own squad leader, Sergeant Crivelli. Too tired at that moment to speak or even smile, Chris merely nodded to the other man. His eyes focused on the stripes on the noncom's sleeves and he was reminded of all the things Chip had tried to tell him about being on the front lines. Reaching into his jacket, he pulled out the last letter he'd received from his brother. He could not recall how many times he'd read it and it didn't really matter; he could hear his brother saying the words written on the worn and wrinkled page as clearly as if he'd said them in person.

"Hey," Crivelli ventured, gesturing to the paper the young medic held. "How many times have you read that letter? Bout a million?"

Chris grinned a little at that. "Yeah, Sarge. At least that many."

"I got a letter from my five year old daughter once. Read it till the writing was so faded I could hardly see the letters any more. I finally sent it back to my wife, for safe keeping, ya know?" The sergeant paused for a moment, then gave Chris a pat on the shoulder and crawled out of the foxhole. "Well, I'll see ya later, Doc. Mother hen has to go check on her chicks. It'll be quiet for a while yet, so if you're not gonna catch some shuteye, then eat something, okay?"

Chris laughed softly as Crivelli tossed him a can of rations. "Okay, Sarge. I'll get right on it." He looked down at the round metal container and made out the words 'canned ham and eggs'. He rolled his eyes and an incredulous smile formed on his face. "Gee! Thanks a bunch, Sarge!"

"Valdez told me those are your favorites!" Crivelli's laugh echoed back to over the rim of the foxhole.

Chris opened the can. He told himself the contents weren't as bad as it really was --until he remembered how bad they actually were. Before trying to get some sleep, he got one quick letter written.

Hey Chip,

It seems forever since we had mail and I've just got a few minutes to start answering one or two letters. You'll probably laugh when I say that I'm remembering the times you and Joey sent letters home and how often you guys mentioned that you didn't get much time to write. Boy! You two weren't kidding! I keep finding that out more and more each week. And I thought when I was back home that I didn't have many spare minutes between school and working part time! Some kinda knucklehead I was, huh? I guess this'll be one of those 'I told you so, kid' things that you said we'd have to talk about over that beer I'll be buying for you some day. I know I'm going to take a lot of ribbing from you and Joey, but it'll be worth it. I can't wait for us to be together again when this is all over. I picture that in my mind each day. You remember how Grandma

Cecie is always saying that if you hold a thought or an image in your mind, it'll come true? I know it's corny, but I've always believed that. Anyway, if we did happen to meet up sometime, don't you know they love to hear about it back home?!

Anyway, just to let you know, the guys in my outfit are a real great bunch. My job's pretty tough a lot of the time but I know now it was the right thing for me to choose. When all of this is over, I think I'd like to go on and try to get into medical school somewhere. Mom would love that and I know you and Joey and Louise would too.

Well, I gotta run now. Literally. Looks like we're pulling up stakes all of a sudden and getting out of here. Gee, I'll miss this foxhole. Nah! I'll write again soon.

Keep safe big brother.

Chris

PS. I hate canned ham and eggs!

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October, 1944

Doc Carter set the paper down on a small table and pulled a pencil out of his pocket. "Okay Sarge, ready when you are." Initially, Cajé was going to help Saunders write a letter, but he was now temporary Squad Leader, and was out on patrol that night, so Doc had naturally volunteered in his place. Over the months they'd all known each other, the sergeant had come to trust the judgment and integrity of both men; their respect for the privacy he guarded so tenaciously was beyond reproach. He trusted them implicitly.

As Saunders spoke, the medic wrote his words down neatly and exactly the way in which they were given.

Hey Joey,

Listen, don't get worried about it that this isn't my handwriting. Some shrapnel nicked me up so my right hand and arm have a got a mess of stitches and it's pretty swollen. I'll be okay but it's going to be another week before I get out the battalion hospital. Our squad's medic dropped by to see me today and he offered to write a letter for me if I wanted, so I'm taking him up on it. Besides, he's got the best penmanship out of anyone in the squad...including Nelson!

I hope you're doing okay, Joey. Hey, I finally got your last letter. Congratulations on making Corporal! Don't let it go to your head, huh? Yeah, I'm smiling as I say that, knucklehead.

As usual, things here are always busy. Our Lt. got sent to England for a week for some medical tests. The timing couldn't have been worse what with all the casualties we've had lately. But that's the way things go sometimes. Since we've lost so many of our NCOs, I'm the only one left with the most experience --- including the guy that's filling in for Hanley! Lucky me, huh? Oh well, as the saying goes, 'I don't hire and fire, I just work here.'

I don't know if you've heard from Chris yet, what with the mail taking longer than usual to get between here and there, but anyway, if you've gotten his letters, or even my last one, then you know he's enlisted. I'm pretty sure your reaction's the same as mine was, except that you won't read him the riot act because you figure I already have -- and

I did! But I also told him that I understood his reasons. The letter I got from Mom a couple of days later just set it all in stone. She knew we'd be wondering why she signed the papers to let Chris enlist. It wasn't that he talked her into it – that's his story and besides, you know you can't talk Mom into anything when she stands her ground. The truth is, Joey, she let him go, despite wanting him to stay home. Ya know, all his life he's been looking up to us, trying to be like us, following us everywhere. So Mom knew that he didn't have to explain his feelings about wanting to do his part in this war. She told me that she knew if she kept Chris home, he'd have stayed, but that something inside of him just wouldn't be the same. I know what she means, so I can't be mad at her for what she did. I was pretty upset when I first got the news. I won't deny it scared the hell out of me either. But it must have been worse for Mom. Letting Chris go was different for her than when you and I left. We both know that was tough for her too, but we weren't kids anymore either. This has to be the hardest thing she's ever done, Joey. I've been in this war a long time now, so have you and we've seen guys do things they never thought they could ever do, but I think what Mom did -- well, that took a type of courage that you, me or Chris will never know. And truth be told, I hope none of us ever do.

Anyway, since you're reading this, you likely know that Chris is a corpsman now. How about that, huh? While I wish he were home, safe and sound, I have to say that I'm very proud of him. He's so young, and to have as tough a job as any of us, maybe even more, well, you know what I mean. I often think my job is a lot to handle, but the field medics have so much on their own plates that I wonder how they do it and stay sane. Doc's giving me a 'you said it buddy' look. Joey, I think Chris'll be able to handle himself just fine. I can't say I don't worry that he's okay, but I know he'll do his job and he won't let anyone down. From the letters I have from him so far, I can tell that he trusts himself and that's all I can ask of him. Just so you know, he's promised to finish up school when he gets home. Hey, we'll have to make him go to college and become a full-fledged doctor now. Wouldn't everyone love that? I know Mom would especially -- and Dad too if he were still with us.

By now you've seen the photo that I sent along. I'd forgotten how Chris had bandaged Jack up with all those clean towels. I bet if Grandma Saunders had seen that now, she'd have said it was destiny showing itself in that picture! Hey, what do you say that if our little brother does become a doctor someday, we frame this old photo and put it up on his office wall – right above his diplomas and stuff? I think he'd like that.

I got some mail from home recently. Everyone's fine and they all send their love. Mom said Grandpa Ed came over a while back and helped Pops get a fresh coat of paint on the house and garage. They also replaced some shingles on the roof, so now everything should be all set for winter. Mom also says for us not to worry about her, that she's doing okay. But I can read between the lines and tell how much she misses us. She's still working a lot of hours and it kills me that I'm not there to help out. I hope the war ends soon and we can all get back home. Soon as we do, you know she'll start bugging the two of us to go out and find ourselves each a nice girl, get married and start giving her a bunch of grandkids to spoil. I don't know, come to think of it, maybe fighting a war is easier!

Hey, speaking of people getting married, Louise wrote to me that Beth Kincaid married a pilot in the Air Corps. His bomber got shot down and well, I guess you know how that goes. I feel bad for Beth and would like to write to her, but I don't know. She and I had started to talk about making some serious plans, and then after I enlisted, she made it pretty clear that she didn't want to hear from me again. I couldn't blame her really. I had no illusions that I might not make it back. Still, I can't believe that she married a serviceman after all. But she's a nice girl and I'm sorry she lost someone she cared so much about. Maybe Louise can tell her that for me. After all, she's pretty good

friends with Beth's little sister, Janie. By the way, Pops says that girl still has a voice louder than a foghorn!

Well, you stay safe Joey. I'll let Chris know that I sent you the news about him. When you get a chance to write to Mom, just let her know you understand why she let Chris go. I think she needs to hear that from us.

Chip

PS: Our little brother hates canned ham and eggs! Who'd a thought, huh?

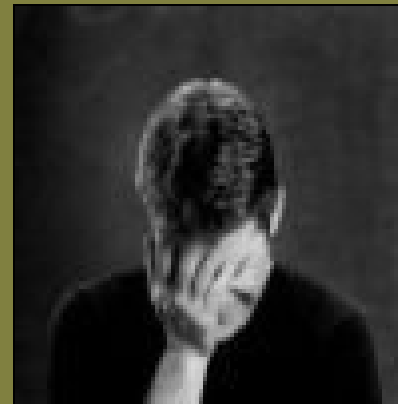
November, 1944

The 88's had come pounding in again. The lines of conflict were fluid and unstable and the destruction caused by the barrage was followed by the onslaught of enemy infantry. Human flesh and earth were rent apart as if they were no more than fragile eggshells. Amidst the constant brain shattering noise and stench of putrid carnage, was the desperate pleas of the wounded, the haunted cries of the dying. Each an unmistakable element in the fabric of battle. Each a terrifying testament to the horror of war.

PFC Christopher Saunders collapsed to the frigid ground. Reacting instinctively, he laid protectively over the GI he carried as bullets sprayed around him. Where was the stretcher team he had been yelling for? Where was the line where hope and safety and humanity lay behind? He could not begin to know; in the smoke of weapons firing, in the darkness of pain and fatigue, his sense of direction blurred, swallowed whole by the battle. Oddly, a forgotten memory threaded unconsciously into his vision: *he was five years old and it was the first time he'd gone fishing with his brothers. They showed him how to bait a worm on a hook and he had nearly cried when the twisting little thing had sunk beneath the water of the pond.* He shook the image from his mind. Breathing hard, his throat burned from screaming, burned from the smoke and burned from the odor of cordite and gore that hung in the air. He squeezed his eyes shut against the bile rising from his gut as the stench of it all assaulted him. And he squeezed them shut against the sudden realization that the man he had struggled so hard to save, had kept talking to in order to keep them both focused, was now dead. In truth, Chris knew Sergeant Crivelli would never have made it to the aid station; his injuries were too severe. Still, unconcerned for his own wounds, Chris had tried. He screamed again for help. But help didn't come. There were too many critically wounded men needing help. And not enough medics left to help them. Bullets, grenades and artillery shells made no distinctions between who was armed and who wasn't. Corpsmen bled too. Born from the tightness in his breast, tears tracked tiny rivers in the grime and filth that encrusted his face and he slumped forward, grasping Crivelli's blood slickened hand. Brow pressed against brow, he sobbed. "I'm sorry Sarge. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry..."

And then the exhausted corpsman lost consciousness.

He couldn't really recall whether hours or days had passed since the recent battle took out all but a few men from his platoon. He didn't remember taking a bullet in



his right thigh, and that another had passed through his left flank. He hadn't even remembered being picked up and carried to the battalion hospital. A day after he'd regained consciousness, one of the few surviving medics from his outfit, Jose Valdez, had come to see him. They'd been good friends since Chris had joined the platoon and knowing how Saunders liked to remain in contact with his brothers and his family back home, Jose scrounged up a little pad of paper and even something to write with. It was only a small thing really; the paper was lumpy and wrinkled, as if it had gotten soaked with rain or snow and then had eventually dried out. The pencil, too, was worse for wear. It was battered, and resembled a chewed up twig more than a writing instrument. Simple gifts. But at that moment they meant more to Chris than he could express. He accepted the items reverently, and looked up at his fellow corpsman. "Thanks," was all his ragged voice could manage.

Jose's subtle smile and the nonchalant shrug of his shoulders perfectly conveyed unspoken understanding and mutual respect.

Another day passed before Chris was able to remain awake for more than a few minutes; blood loss and fatigue had taken their toll. As evening drew near, one of the nurses came to check his vital signs again. As she registered his blood pressure, respirations, pulse and temperature on his chart, she asked if he needed anything.

His voice was raspy. "No ma'am. I'm fine for now."

She turned to leave and noticed the young man's hand trembling as he reached for the paper, pencil and photograph on the empty supply crate that served as a bedside table. He looked embarrassed as she laid the items beside him.

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Need to write a letter?"

"Yes ma'am," he answered, but the tone in his voice did not betray his doubt in being able to accomplish that task.

"You're still a bit shaky, Private. Would you like some help?" There was hesitation in his eyes and she bragged with dry humour, "When I was twelve I got a medal for penmanship." He smiled back at her, blushing a little, but nonetheless began to refuse her offer. "I got another medal for spelling."

At that, Chris laughed quietly. Her grey eyes held only respect and compassion, not pity, so he simply nodded his acceptance of her help.

She pulled a battered wooden chair beside the cot and took the paper and pencil in hand. "Now," she asked as she tucked a stray strand of rich auburn hair behind one ear, "who are you writing to?"

"My brother." He picked up the photo and showed it to her. "He's the one with the sergeant's stripes."

The Lieutenant cocked one eyebrow. "Ah."

Chris's smile beamed. "He's in the 361st."

"Practically neighbors with us."

A wistful expression etched across Chris' face. "Yeah."

Over the next few minutes the nurse wrote the words the young medic recited.

Dear Chip,

Don't get worried that I'm not writing this; I got hit recently, but I'm going to be just fine. The doctors have already told me that I'll be back on the line in a couple of weeks or so. I don't know if I'll get back to my old outfit. I hope that I do, but wherever I'm at, it'll be right where I want to be, where I know I'm needed. My outfit's been in the thick of it a lot. We lost quite a few guys – men it was my honor to know. Men that I'll never forget. Some of them saved my life more than once. I know I must have said

'thank you' to them then, but right now, I can't remember if I did or not. And if I did, was it enough? I don't know.

Chip, just in case I never get the chance to say it to you face-to-face, thanks for everything. Thanks for helping to raise me and Joey and Louise and for all the help you gave Mom. I don't think that I ever fully realized just how much we depended on you then, or how much we still do. I understand now why you wanted to keep me at home and how much you wanted me to stay in school. Somehow just saying these things right now, it doesn't seem enough, but it's all I have and you deserve to hear it. I thought I understood so much before now, but you were right, I didn't. So, look at me, huh? I'm still learning stuff from my big brother. Guess I always will, and that's okay.

If I don't get a chance to write before the holiday, have a Happy Thanksgiving. I miss you Chip and I'm still looking forward to buying you that beer someday!

Chris

His voice faded as he drifted into a restful sleep. A cursory check satisfied the nurse that all was well with him. Moved by the sincerity of the young medic's words, she felt compelled to add a short message at the bottom of the letter before sealing it in an envelope.

Sergeant,

Your brother is asleep now. His love and loyalty for family obviously runs very deep, so I believe that you would appreciate hearing, from someone who is here with him, that he is recovering well and is anxious to return to his duties.

As with so many brave soldiers that I have helped to care for, it is obvious from the passion in Private Saunders' words that his dedication and concern for his fellow soldiers, and for the job he performs in service to his country is without measure. I hope that you do not think it presumptuous of me to say so, but I have no doubt that your family must be very proud of him.



Sincerely,

2nd Lieutenant Dana G. Marshall, RN, 45th Evac Unit

December, 1944

Thunder rolled and the rain puddled on the ground and ran in little streams off tree leaves and vines. It washed in sheets down from the roofs of the abandoned buildings where Corporal Joseph Saunders' outfit was billeted. After being out on consecutive long patrols, he and the other men in his squad wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep. Mechanically, one footfall followed the other and he could barely remember what day of the week it was.

"Hey Saunders!" one of the men in his platoon, Eccleston, waved him over to a little table set up in the middle of the room. "C'mere!" The haggard-faced soldier from the Bronx gave the Corporal a grim look while he pointed to a stack of letters on the table. "Ya bum!" Eccleston laughed good-naturedly and produced a bundle of American dollars from his pocket. He slapped them against Joey's shirtfront. "I shoulda' known you'd win the pot for getting the most letters this time! Do us all a favor, okay, and don't spend it in one place?"

Speechless, Joey curled his hand around the wad of bills and picked up the letters, thinking he must surely be dreaming. A broad smile spread itself on his features as he made his way to his cot and slowly sat down. He handled each envelope, one by one, and read the addresses. Then he arranged them by the dates on the postmark, wanting to read them in the order they'd been written. Fatigue no longer plagued him; hunger no longer gnawed at his belly. And for just a little while, he didn't think about the war. As he went through each letter, he immediately wrote a reply.

Hiya Chris!

What's shakin' kid? Sorry you haven't heard from me in a long time, but you're used to the mail being slow. Ya know, I keep thinking of what I'm going to do when I get back home...hah! Maybe I'll just go work for the Post Office! I'll see the damned mail delivered! ON TIME TOO! Nah! I've done enough walking since coming over here. I want to get me a sit down job! Yeah, you'll believe that when you see it, right? Me at a desk job and I can't sit still for more than 5 seconds!

Hey, I got back from a patrol today and BINGO! I won \$100 bucks! Can you believe that?! The whole platoon had a bet on who'd get the biggest pile of letters on our next mail call and yours truly got the winning number --- 10 letters! One guy I know has 4 sisters and 3 brothers and he only gets one letter that they all sign. I told him it sounds like they have squatter's rights! Hah! Anyway, after I got all the letters sorted, I settled in to read them. I have to agree with Chip, you should've stayed in school. Knowing him, if he could've reached across the ocean and given you a good shaking for dropping out, he would have. And make no mistake, Chris, I'd have helped him! But like he's already told you, what's done is done and there's no use fretting about it now. You gotta move on and from the sound of it, you have.

So, you're a medic now? I know you're a good one and that a lot of guys are grateful for your help. I guess by now you've seen more than you ever knew you would. I know it's hard to keep going ahead sometimes, but you have a lot of guts and a lot of heart too. Chip and I, we both know you'll do your job 100 % and then some. I know you're used to me being funny all of the time, but let me take a serious moment, Chris. Maybe we always call you 'kid' and we likely always will, that's just us being your big brothers, but just let me tell you here and now, we know you're not a kid anymore and you should know that, okay? Chip wrote and said he wished more than anything that he could tell you that personally. I do too. So, that said, I guess we better all keep sharp and stay low to the ground -- like humping rabbits, ya know? Promise you won't repeat that to Mom. Or to The Brat either --- she'll squeal on me for sure! Christ on crutches! Mom would wash my mouth out with soap if she heard how I talk now -- even though I'm 22 fucking years old! Well, there I go again! So sue me, huh? Just don't you pick up any bad habits over there. Mom and Pops will both skin your backside. And Louise will never let you live it down either! Hah!

Listen, I know you're going to get this real late, long after the holidays have passed, but Merry Christmas anyway. Maybe by this time next year the war'll be over. You just keep that frame of mind that Grandma Cecie's always talking about. You know

the one. Chip never believed in it, or if he does, he's never said so, but anyway, you and I always have. Hey, I bet Mom will cook up the biggest holiday dinners ever when we get home. I can just taste it now!

Well, I'll be seeing ya little brother. I'm real proud of you, and I know everyone else is too. Don't you ever forget that.

Joey

PS: Eat some canned ham and eggs for me. I hear it's your favorite ration!

The letters Joey wrote home were, as usual, purposefully upbeat and humorous. But the one he wrote to Chip allowed for him to be candid in a way the others could not.

Hey big brother,

I got all the news about Chris. That must have been rough when you got his letter saying he'd dropped out and enlisted, especially with that replacement you got the same day --- that whole thing was really strange, all the similarities and everything. Man! I don't know if I'd have handled things any differently if I'd been in your place. That must have been a real curve ball for you but it sounds like, from your other letter, you're okay with it now. Still, I wish I could have been there for you. I know you don't like to make a big deal out of a lot of things and you keep a lot of stuff locked up tight, so I just wish I'd have been there for you is all. Even big brothers need a little help now and again.

Well, anyway, so Chris is a medic now? Who'd have ever thought it? Like you, I'm right there with ya, wishing he'd have kept his silly butt in school and stayed out of the war. But as you said, what's done is done and there's no use crying over spilled milk. I reckon now our little brother is in the thick of it all over there. I sure didn't want him to have to go through the things we've gone through. I know you've passed on what advice you can to him and if I know Chris, he'll keep it in his head, not forget it and it'll help him when he needs it most. Sounds as though he trusts himself. I guess he hasn't forgotten all of the Saunders House Rules -- well, most of them anyway. Listen, he's sure as hell is going to finish getting that diploma! After that, I think he should go on to college. Even if Chris does something besides going into medicine, he ought to go to college.

He's always been the best in school out of all of us, well, maybe except for The Brat. I hear she's doing real well and giving him a run for those honor rolls he was always on. That's our little sister, huh, always one-upping us, or trying to anyway! I got her latest school picture. Man, oh man! Chip, she's really going to be catching some looks from the guys --- and soon, if she hasn't already. Kind of scary to think about that, isn't it? We better all get home soon! That's all I gotta say. But come to think of it, she's got a pretty good right hook -- for a girl. I mean, growing up with three brothers, who'd want to get on her bad side? Guess we shouldn't worry about her... but nah, we're her brothers; we're supposed to do that aren't we?



Hey, that reminds me. I got the news about Beth Kincaid. That's real sad. I hope she's okay. I do remember how you and her were making plans, talking about it anyway. Things had gotten pretty serious with you two not long before you left. But well, it's the way things go sometimes and it's usually for a reason. Still, I was struck a bit dumb to hear she'd married a guy in uniform. I mean, she couldn't stand the thought of you enlisting, so it just didn't make any sense that she'd hook up with a guy in the service. Anyway, I was still sad to hear that Beth lost a husband in the war. I told mom to give her our condolences even though it's so late in coming. I hope she meets another guy, but I gotta tell ya, she couldn't have done better than you, Chip. Beth was crazy to not wait for you. I wonder if, when you get home, she'll try to patch things up with you? Honestly, though, if she didn't have it in her to wait until you got back, then I don't think she's right for you. Just my opinion, for what it's worth. Nope, big brother, I think there's someone else out there, someone that's smart, got a lot of common sense like you do, and got enough backbone to make it through the hard times without complaining. You know, somebody who can handle a buck sergeant that's been on the front lines! I'm betting she'll be a red head too. Boy! Just listen to me, going on like a cheap palm reader in a run down sideshow! Hah! Okay, I'll get off that kick because I can just see the look on your face!

Say, I still have a couple of letters I want to get written while I've got the time, so this seems like a good place to sign off for now. Keep a fresh mag handy and keep those Krauts running to Berlin, you hear me big brother?

Take care. And even though it'll be over when you get this, 'Merry Christmas' Chip!

Joey

***** ***** *****

January, 1945

Sergeant Saunders' breath fogged the night air. Amidst the noise of revving engines and drivers slamming the doors as they climbed into the cabs of trucks, the men of King Company loaded their gear and piled inside the canvas covered transport vehicles that would take them to their next base of operations further up the line. Taking one last drag on his cigarette, Saunders tossed it to the ground. Tired from days of fighting, from lack of sleep, lack of a decent meal, from lack of keeping kids alive who had no business being in war, he struggled to keep up the morale of his men at a time when his own was so threadbare. Casualties had been high lately. And this morning they'd suffered two more: McBride and Hummel. Both so young. McBride had barely been alive when Doc had reached him; the blast from the grenades that had hit the two soldiers had left him unrecognizable as a human being. Hummel had lived only long enough to gasp out a few words to Saunders: 'Sarge? Did I do okay?' The voice and the face still haunted him. He nearly tripped against a mud and ice slickened wheel rut in the road. Grinding out a curse, he caught himself before falling. Shrugging his Thompson higher onto his right shoulder, he continued across the road to what had once been a bakery, but for the last week had served as part of battalion HQ.

Lt. Hanley looked up from the paperwork he was neatly placing into a canvas map case. "Ready to pull out of here, Saunders?"

"Yes, sir," Saunders rasped, dragging a forearm across his brow. "Everyone's loaded up. We're just waiting for Doc."

The lieutenant's dark brows drew together. He tilted his head just slightly to the right and hitched his thumbs in his ammo belt. "What's wrong with Doc? He understood the tight schedule we're on, didn't he? We're lucky to get a ride out of here."

Saunders tried to conceal the rising irritation in his voice and failed. "He *knows* that, Lieutenant."

Hanley glared at him. "So *where* is he, Sergeant?"

Saunders shifted his weight onto his left hip. The expression in his eyes matched that of the directness in his voice. "He went down to the field hospital." Taking a deep breath and letting it out, he looked askance and subtly added, "He wanted to check on McBride before we hit the road." Saunders took his helmet off and ran a hand through his hair. The room was quiet for a moment, both men recalling the nightmare of the battle they'd endured just before dawn. "Lieutenant," Saunders finally continued, "that place is pretty busy. Doc...probably just got waylaid a little. I told him if he wasn't back by seventeen hundred hours, we'd pick him up."

Hanley nodded in understanding as he slung the map bag on his left shoulder. There was no reproach in his voice, but he was firm. "This isn't a taxi service, Saunders. You know it and Doc knows it. He was supposed to be here on time. We can't afford for the whole platoon to be off schedule." He placed his helmet on his head and grabbed up his rifle. "Seventeen hundred hours *means* seventeen hundred hours."

Saunders offered no excuses, but Hanley read the look on his face and relented; he knew Doc Carter well enough to know that the man wouldn't be running late if he could help it. Hanley sighed. He was tired. *Hell*, he thought, *they were all tired!* Tempers were running on edge. Like Saunders, he'd hated losing McBride. And Hummel, well, he knew that for the sergeant, that loss went deeper. Hanley wished there'd been something he could've said, but there simply hadn't been, no more than there had been time for him to personally check on McBride. "Alright. We'll pick Doc up on the way out."

Saunders nodded. "Yes sir."



The hospital was housed in an eighteenth century manor. Doc Carter made his way down the wide stone stairs that led to the building's main entrance. The squad wouldn't take it well when they learned about McBride; he'd be going home as a 'basket case'. The GI's voice, ravaged with anger, terror and unbearable pain still echoed in the medic's mind. He couldn't help but think that Hummel had been better off. *At least his suffering is over*, Doc reminded himself, trying to make some sense of it all and failing miserably. A cold shiver, totally unrelated to the weather, ran it's way up his spine. He had a terrible feeling, deep in his gut, that McBride would never make it home, that he'd find a way to end his own life. The medic clenched his fist until his fingers were numb. He wanted to scream against the unfairness of what the war did to people -- regardless of what side they fought on. He wanted to scream at trying to keep wounded men alive with no more than bandages and sulfa powder and alcohol. He wanted to scream at the lack of decency in the world, at having to live like less than an animal, at the lack of a

little R&R time the men he served with needed so desperately. He wanted to scream at the lack of a place to sleep other than a cold, damp foxhole, or a drafty barn. He just wanted to scream. But it didn't come. He knew it wouldn't. Like all the men he knew, and many more he would never know, he simply carried on.

Letting out a heavy breath, he gathered his composure. One quick glance at his watch told him he'd never make it back into town before the company was loaded up and the trucks pulled out. He'd have to wait for the platoon to come and pick him up. If he stood nearer to the road they'd spot him quicker, so he walked in that direction. As he did so, he glanced at the night sky. It would snow again soon and he was glad that, for once, his outfit was getting transportation other than on the soles of their boots. Rubbing his gloved hands together to drive the cold away, he continued toward the wide gravel drive in front of the hospital and was suddenly forced to jump out of the way of an oncoming ambulance.

A medic climbed hastily from the driver's seat. He ran to open the doors so the wounded could be unloaded. "Hey!" he called out to Carter, "I don't have any help. Can you give me a hand here?"

The trucks carrying Hanley's platoon bounced over deep ruts made by weeks of constant troop traffic. The lead transport slowed down as Kirby tuned the wheel onto the hospital's drive. From the passenger side, the sergeant spotted his missing medic and told Kirby to roll the window down. The breaks squealed as the heavy vehicle came to a stop. "Hey Doc!" the Private called out. "Get a move on, will ya!"

Kneeling alongside a stretcher, Doc waved in answer and then turned to the corpsman directly across from him. "Looks like my taxi's here."

The younger corpsman glanced at him. "You'd best get goin' then. Not often we get rides these days."

"Don't I know it!" Carter's brow creased in curiosity. The other medic's smile seemed oddly familiar to him, and there was something in the voice as well, but with the darkness and feeling so dog tired, he simply couldn't concentrate on trying to figure it out. Suddenly the young medic's hand came across the short distance over the stretcher and Doc grasped it.

"Thanks for the help."

"Don't mention it," Carter replied. He stood up and turned toward the truck and Kirby, who once more hollered for him to hurry up, complaining that everyone would likely freeze to death if he didn't get onboard now.

"Hey! I didn't get your name!" the grateful corpsman called out.

Doc glanced over his shoulder. "Carter. James Carter."

"I'm Saunders. My friends call me Chris. Take it easy, huh?"

Carter's jaw went slack. Eyes wide with disbelief, the shock of this revelation struck him utterly speechless – but only for a moment. He wagged a finger at the man. "WAIT THERE!" he shouted. "Don't go away!"

Chris was puzzled by the man's sudden excitement, but returned all his attention to the job at hand.

Running to the truck, Doc opened the driver's door and peered inside to find the Sarge. Over Saunders' harsh orders that he get onboard, Doc emphatically told him, "Shut up!"

Saunders stiffened and tilted his head, his expression volatile.

"Just get out, Sarge!" Doc insisted as he ran around to the passenger side and opened the door. "We can't leave here yet! If we do...I'll never forgive myself." He waited

a beat, then added, in a tone that would have been quiet but for the desperation still evident in his voice, "And neither will you."

Trusting that the sergeant would follow him, he set off in the direction of the medic beside the ambulance; two other aids had arrived to assist him and they were preparing to move the wounded soldier inside the hospital.

As Carter and Saunders drew near, Saunders stopped, barely contained impatience and irritation clearly evident in his demeanor. "Alright Doc! What's this all about?"

The young man before them looked up. His eyes were wide in recognition of a voice he could never forget, of a face he had only seen in photos and in dreams for over three long years. He stood up slowly, full blown surprise nearly rocking him off balance. His voice shook as he uttered his brother's name.

"Chip."

Doc Carter's tears, like those of the two men embracing before him, traced over his face. But he felt no shame. The laughter of the two men -- brothers in more than just blood -- fought over barely contained sobs borne of absolute, unabashed joy. This moment, Doc knew, would be all too brief. There simply would not be enough time for all the things to be said that should be said. Only a short while ago, on the steps of the battalion hospital, he had felt utterly bereft of the beliefs that so often gave him the will to continue. But now, his faith was rekindled and the air he breathed did not seem tainted by hopelessness, or death, or sorrow. Whether by fate, or by some higher power, for an all too short fraction of time the war would wait.

It was nearly midnight when 2nd Platoon settled into what would be 'home' for the next few days. First Squad was billeted in an old abandoned stone house. It was snowing outside and a fire burned in the hearth. It was only a small flame, enough to keep some coffee warm and heat up some rations -- sufficient to cast a subtle glow over the main room where a handful of soldiers slept. Save one.

Sergeant Saunders sat on the floor near the fire, a tablet of paper in front of him. He suddenly remembered what day it was and he smiled as he wrote...

Happy New Year, Mom! You'll never guess who I saw tonight...



The End