

The Drop

I breathed heavily, a cold sweat running down the back of my neck. It had been only three months since boot camp and like most of my men, I was ready to fight. I looked around the cramped C-47; I looked at the faces of my squad members. Garnett, Wajda, Wells, Hernandez, and Walker were the members of my squad. They all were green with the exception of Walker. He had been transferred to my squad after his entire unit was decimated by the German in Italy. The only reason he had survived was because he had to report to division headquarters that day. My name is Henry Archer, and it was my duty as a squad leader to make sure that these boys made it home in one piece and not draped in an American flag. We were in route to Holland as part of the 508th Infantry Regiment that was participating in Operation: Market Garden, an ambitious plan to end the war by Christmas. Our regiment was tasked with capturing the Nijmegen Bridge to keep the British Army tanks moving on their way to the Rhine River. German resistance was said to be nothing but boys and old men. Little did I know how wrong they were.

We landed with no flak fire and the sky was as blue as I had ever seen it. "Sgt. Archer, what now, sir?" Wajda asked me.

"All right, let's move out and follow Corporal Higgins," I replied. We advanced to the outskirts of the city with no problem. It was noon and most of us were expecting to attack the highway. However, our battalion leader was having problems contacting command for further orders. So in the meantime he ordered a recon squad to scout the area for potential weak spots. We happened to become the lucky squad assigned for recon.

We quietly advanced through the ditch on the side of the highway with no one spotting us. “Wells, you take point!” I ordered him. All of a sudden we heard the distinctive fire of a German MG42 and we all took cover. “Sarge, are they shooting at us?” Hernandez asked.

“No, they are just shooting to shoot, maybe to scare our guys,” I whispered.

“It sure is scarin’ me,” Wells murmured. Using my binoculars I observed the defenses of the highway, and I was absolutely stunned. Only about a dozen Germans guarded the highway! We hurried back to our assembly point where the rest of us had already gathered to hear what my squad had to say. “Twelve Germans! Guarding this highway! Hitler must not have very good priorities” were just some of the responses we got to our information. “Maybe most of them ran because they knew we were coming!” Wells shouted and everyone seemed to agree. So we formed a plan to take the highway and it was...no plan. There were just twelve and one MG42 with which we could easily deal. We were to advance through the ditches and attack head on while some other guys would throw grenades to take out the MG42. It was a sound plan, and we were given ten minutes to check our gear and prepare for the assault.

In those short ten minutes, I mentally went to when I had first entered boot camp. The drill sergeants were, in my opinion, some of the worst people on the planet. Something as miniscule as a speck on a soldier’s rifle would bring an unpleasant punishment. I met Wells while we both were on kitchen duty at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Wells told me he was caught trying to steal a car. He didn’t want to go to jail, so he escaped to Dallas where he joined the army. We both knew that finding him in the middle of a war would be hard. Wells soon shipped out and found himself here for the wrong reasons. He really had nothing to live for, since he was an only child and both of his parents were dead. He was also an alcoholic, having begun drinking at the age of sixteen. I really like the guy. He was easygoing and, despite all his troubles, was

actually a nice guy. It wasn't until about three weeks before we shipped out that I met the rest of my squad. Wajda was the one I liked the most. A native of Poland, Wajda managed to escape Poland before it was completely conquered and found his way to the US in 1939. He learned English fast and waited for the day he could join the US army and defeat the Nazis to free his family and country.

I soon snapped back into the present and looked into all their faces. I knew that every time that we went into combat could be our last. However, our men were confident and prepared physically. But, for the exception of Walker, they were by no means mentally prepared. That was something only combat experience brought.

It was late in the day when we finally got started with taking the highway. Our CO blew the whistle and we charged. However, the forward line was cut down in an instant by German fire. "What was that!!? That's more than twelve Germans!!!" I heard someone shout.

"Oh shoot!! It's a whole battalion!!!" Wells shouted.

"What do we do!!?" We can't charge at them!" Wajda screamed.

Bullets flew around me, and the sky turned gray with smoke. I could hear our own guys screaming. Some were screaming in pain, others for medics, and some for their mothers. I saw Walker firing wildly with his Thompson. Then the Germans began shelling us with their artillery. "Piekło! Niemcy dostał mnie!" (Hell! The German got me!) I heard someone scream. I realized it was Polish and I knew that Wajda had been hit. Garnett ran out of cover to get him. Moments later a shell hit them both. The blast sent bits and pieces of both of them flying all over the place.

"WAJDA, GARNETT!!!" I screamed. There was no answer.

I saw a German Panzer IV come over the bridge guns blazing. I thought this wasn't a fight, this was a massacre. Walker froze when the shells came in. His memories of the Italian Theatre had left him stunned. I tried to shake him, but he had that thousand-mile stare. He wasn't going to fight.

At that moment I felt a sharp thump in my back, and I knew I had been hit. I crumpled to the ground wounded. I looked around. Our guys were dying everywhere. I saw a German tank shell kill Corporal Higgins and two men behind him. The Germans began to push forward shooting all the wounded troops. I caught sight of their uniforms and panicked. They were Waffen-SS, some of Germany's toughest troops. I felt Walker grab me and start to drag me back to our assembly point while reassuring me that I would survive, and then everything went black.

I awoke in a field hospital surrounded by some men of the 82nd airborne.

"Hey buddy, you feeling all right?" one of them asked.

"Yes, I feel fine. Where's my company?" I asked.

"Son, are you with the 508th?" another one asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"You participated in the Nijmegen attack, right?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered back.

"Boy, as far as we know everyone who participated in that attack is dead. Simmons here found you next to a dead rifleman," he told me.

My heart sank; I knew that dead rifleman had to be Walker. All of them were dead, all of them. I had failed in my duty to keep them alive. No, it wasn't my fault. It was the Germans fault, and it was Hitler's fault as well. It was they who killed my squad, not me. I saw a couple of

German prisoners in the corner of the assembly point. Fueled by my hatred, I grabbed a rifle with a bayonet and ran towards them.

“Die you dirty krauts!!” I shouted and wildly stabbed one of them several times. It took five men to restrain me and stop me from killing the second one. I sobbed that night.

I later found out from a division command that it was the Recon Battalion of the 9th Waffen-SS Panzer Division that attacked us at Nijmegen and that there were, in fact, no survivors except me. I was evacuated to England with an infamous “Million-Dollar wound” and would soon be going back to the states. Market Garden was a massive failure for our side. The cost of this failure had been high on our part. Two days before I was to leave for America I was awarded the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star for my actions during this battle. I didn’t see the point of it. All I had tried to do was my job and failed, and yet here I was getting a medal for my failure.

As I leaned on the railing of the ship heading back to the US, I thought of all the dead men still there at Nijmegen: Walker, Wells, Wajda, Garnett, and Hernandez. They were the real heroes not me. They were dead and I was alive. As we steamed out of the harbor, I threw the Bronze Star into the ocean and watched it float to the bottom.