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TIME FALL

By

Timothy Ashby

“The separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion,
although a persistent one.”

Albert Einstein

PROLOGUE



Berlin, April 20, 1945

The boy stood in the shell-cratered Reich Chancellery garden, eyes swollen from smoke and sleeplessness. He swayed in his rotting boots, listening to explosions and the ratcheting noise of automatic weapons fire a few blocks away.

At that moment the biggest worry of 12-year-old Hanno Kasper was not death or maiming, but stench. His own, to be exact. He knew that the Führer, whom he was waiting to meet, was a stickler for personal hygiene. Hanno had not bathed or changed his clothes in over three weeks, and when he wasn't concentrating on survival, the reek of his body made him gag.

Eight other boys between the ages of eleven and sixteen waited with him. They wore soiled and torn Hitler Youth uniforms and *Einheitsfeldmütze* caps. One of them, the smallest and thinnest, had his sleeve cut away from a bandage-swathed arm. Fresh blood seeped through the dirty white of the bandage. Hanno watched the smaller boy's pained expression, wondering if he'd be able to hold his tears until the audience with the Führer was over.

There was movement at the far end of the *Reichskanzlei* garden. The SS guards around the boys stiffened. The haggard lieutenant responsible for them muttered "*Achtung*," and the youths came to attention. Hanno couldn't suppress the trembling of his exhausted body.

Hitler shuffled towards them, accompanied by Artur Axmann, the Hitler Youth leader, and several Nazi functionaries that Hanno didn't recognize. He stood fifth in line, watching from the corner of his eye as Hitler stopped in front

of each boy. The Führer walked in a stoop, limbs shaking as if palsied. A Russian shell screamed over the shattered Chancellery walls and the Party officials ducked instinctively. Hitler seemed oblivious to it and continued to move down the rank like an automaton.

Then he was in front of Hanno. Hitler's face was white and puffy, his eyes feverish. Dandruff flecked the turned up collar of his overcoat. Hanno felt a lump in his throat as big as his fist. Axmann gave the Führer a medal from a velvet-lined box, smiled at the boy, and introduced him as a hero who had knocked out a Russian tank. Hitler paused with the decoration in his quivering hands. For an instant, his eyes locked with the boy's. He nodded and pinned the Iron Cross first class on Hanno Kasper's stinking jacket.

In the days that followed, as the boy slept in concrete drains next to corpses, as he roamed the burning city with a band of Hitler Youth and SS troopers, ambushing Russians and executing German deserters – even when he was caught by a Russian patrol whose Mongol soldiers cuffed and kicked him - he hid the Iron Cross in his cheek.

Nobody was going to take away his most cherished possession. And nothing was going to make him forget what Hitler had said as he pinned the Iron Cross on his jacket. The Führer's voice had been reduced to a thin rasp, but Hanno had heard the words like thunder in his head and heart: "You are the guarantor of the future."

Berlin, Present Day

“...guarantor of the future,” the old man whispered.

Hanno Kasper opened his eyes and gazed out the floor-to-ceiling window of his penthouse office in the Treptowers building. The Berlin spread out below was almost unimaginably different from the ruined city where he had fought and survived as a feral child seven decades earlier. He sneered at the huge “Molecule Man” sculpture in the River Spree, shaking his head at the irony of its seemingly bullet-riddled figures rising from a spot where he had seen dozens of drifting corpses after the fall of Berlin. And adding insult to the injury of his German pride, the sculptor was both an American *and* a Jew!

Kasper’s eyes returned to the *Bild* tabloid spread on his desk. “Fire Terror!” the headline screamed, describing a wave of car burnings by young anarchists that was convulsing Berlin. His jaw clenched as he read the newspaper’s interview with him in which he had called the arson “a precursor to terrorism.” The reporter had described Kasper as national security advisor to Germany’s chancellor, a retired *Brigadegeneral* of the *Kommando Spezialkräfte* – the elite military special forces unit known as the KSK – and current Chairman of Deutscher Sicherheits und Hilfdienst GmbH Berlin (DSH), Europe’s largest private security company.

Well, at least those yellow journalists got that right! He glanced at an article about yet another attempt to get good German taxpayers to bail out lazy Greeks and Spaniards, then angrily wadded up the paper and threw it at a credenza, where it knocked over a recent photo of Kasper with the Chancellor and the American President. *A female Ossi and a neger leading two of the world’s greatest nations!* Kasper snorted in disgust.

He reached across the desk, opened a little walnut case, and took out the Iron Cross. The talisman was showing its age - like him he thought wryly - its edges tarnished and the swastika's blacking nearly worn away. Yet the connection was still profound, a direct link to a better time when Germany's great destiny had been unblemished and young Hanno had believed in his Führer and the Reich. He closed his fist around the medal and heard Adolf Hitler's words again across the decades.

"I *am* the guarantor," he vowed. "*Zu Befehl!*"



Over Europe, April 21, 1945

"The poor sods. Their odds of returning alive are about the same as playing Russian Roulette with five loaded chambers -- one in six."

Lieutenant Arthur Sutton, aboard the C-47 transport carrying him to the drop zone halfway across Europe, remembered the words of his instructor. The pub in the village of Achnacarry had been crowded and noisy after their last day of training at the Scottish commando school. Sutton had been standing behind two of the British training sergeants, trying to attract the attention of the barmaid so he could order a glass of ale. The tough Welsh instructor was on his second pint, and his voice was loud and ragged with sorrow as he spoke to his companion.

Sutton pretended not to have overheard as he pushed to the bar. The instructor greeted him with a grin and raised his tankard in salute, but Sutton saw the bleakness in his eyes, as if he were toasting the deceased at a wake.

Now, as the C-47 shuddered, Sutton tried not to dwell on what awaited him and the five US Rangers he commanded. His battle experience just made the fear worse. He remembered corpses littering the rocks beneath Pointe du Hoc. Two hundred and twenty-five Rangers had climbed those cliffs; Sutton had been among the ninety survivors. However, compared to this new mission, D-Day had been a cakewalk.

His eyes closed as he conjured an image of his girlfriend, Elaine, to replace the horrors of Normandy and the mournful eyes of his instructor. He smiled as he remembered their last evening together before he shipped out in the fall of 1943. Sutton had scrounged some gasoline coupons so they could drive his '32 Ford coupe from Lee's Summit into Kansas City. The USO dance band was a third-rate imitation of Woody Herman's, the Spam sandwiches were stale, and Elaine's feet hurt. But on the way back, he had parked in a cemetery and the Ford's windows soon fogged. Elaine let him unhook her bra. Her carmine lipstick smeared his face, and her nipples hardened under his fingertips. He had groaned and reached for her garter belt.

"No," she gasped, stopping his delving hands. "I'm not that kinda girl, Art."

"C'mon, baby. Who knows how long I'm gonna be away fighting for our country? Could be years and we'll be getting married anyway when I come back ho--"

The aircraft dropped in an air pocket, jolting Sutton back to the present. He peered up the row of men in canvas bucket seats. The Rangers' faces bore a variety of grimaces as the transport bucked through the turbulence. At the end of the bench, an Alabama farm boy named Holcombe nervously transferred grenades from a canvas pouch to cargo pockets in his jump trousers. Holcombe's lips moved in prayer while perspiration streaked his cheeks. Sutton knew from his own damp hair and armpits that sweat got cold fast in the cabin's thirty-eight degree Fahrenheit temperature.

Sergeant Hugo Roth sat beside Sutton, scowling at Holcombe. Roth unsnapped his safety belt and staggered up the aircraft's pitching deck. He thrust his face at Holcombe's.

"Leave the grenades alone!" he barked. "You could blow us up!"

Holcombe gulped and nodded. Roth returned to his seat and buckled himself in. He looked at Sutton with frosty blue eyes, mouth twisted in disapproval.

"How are we expected to carry out this mission with sad sacks like that?" Roth asked in his strong German accent. "I don't know how he got into the Rangers."

"Can it, Sergeant," Sutton said wearily to his second-in-command.

"The kid sets a bad example! I could see that weeks ago when he--"

"I said *can* it, Sergeant! That's an order!"

Roth's eyes blazed defiantly before he turned his glare back to Private Holcombe.

The Rangers' transport was named *Bouncing Betty*. Like the men she carried, the airplane bore a combat veteran's scars. Shrapnel from anti-aircraft batteries across Europe had pierced its wings and pitted its fuselage. Scottish sleet and Sicilian sun had weathered the cartoon of *Betty Boop* on the transport's nose, fading the letters of her name.

Bouncing Betty was part of a formation of ten C-47's from the US IX Troop Carrier Command based near the Essex village of Boreham. At 8:51 P.M. British Double Summer Time, they had rendezvoused with ten British transports over Shoeburyness and formed into a staggered pattern to give German radar and

ground observers the impression of an aerial armada.

A squadron of P-51 Mustang fighters joined the formation over Dunkirk, pacing the lumbering transports above and alongside to protect them from the Luftwaffe's new jet ME-262 night fighters. *Betty's* pilots grinned as the Mustang jockeys filled their headphones with wisecracks.

The transport's teenaged flight engineer ducked inside the cockpit. "Radio operator just picked up a weather report," he said. "Severe electrical storms northern France, southern Germany. Low cloud ceiling."

"It might screw up the Kraut radar a bit," the copilot remarked, "but it's going to be hell dropping those boys at low altitude."

"No shit," said the pilot, frowning.

Sutton kept looking at his Hamilton wristwatch, a gift from his grandparents after he graduated from the University of Missouri. His grandparents had raised him since he was six years old after being orphaned by a tornado. Grandpa, a retired dentist, had grumbled when Sutton chose to study history and German instead of re-opening the little office on Market Street in Lee's Summit. Still, he had shared Grandma's happiness when Sutton strode across the stage in his spanking new US Army uniform to accept his college diploma. After the ceremony, Grandpa had joked that Art would be "catnip to the ladies" -- thinly disguised pride from an old man who still had a twinkle in his eye.

Sutton hoped he wouldn't be catnip to the Germans.

He looked around the dimly lit cabin, wondering if his men had written "just in

case" letters and left them with the chaplain, as he had. Sergeant Roth appeared to be asleep. Another Ranger talked with the jumpmaster. The remaining men rubbed black camouflage greasepaint on their faces and checked equipment.

The aircraft lived up to its nickname as it bounced through patches of disturbed atmosphere from the storm front. Sutton touched the breast pocket of his tunic, feeling the outline of a folded letter from Elaine. It had arrived the day before he left Achnacarry. He had read it a dozen times already, trying to extract nuances from her bland sentences. Elaine was working in the big ordnance factory at Lake City, making more money than she had ever dreamed of, but complained that rationing provided little opportunity for her to spend it.

He sighed and again withdrew the letter, imagining her fingers folding it, tongue licking the envelope. A tiny round object fell from the envelope onto the aircraft's metal deck. It rolled towards the tail as he desperately fumbled with his safety belt. *Bouncing Betty's* flight engineer picked it up and walked toward Sutton.

"This belong to you, Lieutenant?"

The flight engineer opened his palm, displaying a button with President Franklin Roosevelt's image surrounded by the red, white and blue words "Carry On With Roosevelt." Sutton grinned, feeling sheepish, and plucked it from the young sergeant's hand.

"Yeah, thanks. It's, ah, my good luck charm. I've had it for nine years now and this would be a hell of a time to lose it."

The flight engineer nodded. "Know what you mean. Had me a rabbit's foot up

until I got drafted." He pushed a fatigue cap back on his crew-cut head. "Name's Jim Ward. Home's back in Springfield, Missouri."

Sutton introduced himself as a fellow Missourian and held up the campaign button so Ward could see.

"Would you believe old FDR himself gave this to me."

The flight engineer's eyebrows rose. "No shit?"

"Bet your life. The President came to Kansas City in '36 to give a speech. A bunch of us kids from the high school got to shake his hand afterwards. He had this box of buttons on his lap and he pinned one on each of us. When my turn came, I wished him good luck, and he said he hoped the same for me."

Ward squatted beside him. "Did you have good luck after that?"

Sutton laughed. "Hell yes! The next night I got laid for the first time and I've had nothing but good luck since."

"Can't believe he's gone."

"Yeah," Sutton shook his head. "He was president for more than half my life."

Sutton and Ward exchanged anecdotes about Missouri childhoods and marveled that a one-armed man had been signed to play major league baseball for the St. Louis Browns. Sutton sensed Roth listening as they talked; from the corner of his eye he saw the sergeant sit up as they began discussing the Rangers' mission.

"I knew you guys was Rangers from your badges." Ward pointed to the blue lozenge-shaped insignia on Sutton's left shoulder. "So I figured this was some kind of special mission. What are you guys called? 'Fox' team?"

"Yeah, we're trained to operate behind enemy lines. Jumping into Germany to--"

"*Lieutenant Sutton!*" Roth's agitation thickened his accent. "Must I remind you that our mission is of the utmost secrecy! For all we know this man may be a Nazi spy!"

Sutton clenched his fists. He never intended to tell Ward any more than basic facts about their mission.

"Talk about Nazi spies!" Ward stared at Roth. "Where the hell you from, Fritz, the Gestapo?"

Roth paled. He loosened his safety belt with trembling fingers and moved to the far end of the row of seats.

"Is that guy for real?" Ward asked. "Does he really talk like that?"

"Sergeant Roth is a German Jew. A refugee. The Nazis killed most of his family."

Ward cleared his throat and slumped into Roth's vacated seat. "Guess he's right about your mission being secret and all, Lieutenant. I shouldn't have asked."

"So what could you do even if you were an enemy agent? I don't think it makes any difference now that we're airborne. Besides, you know too much about the old Missouri State Fair to be a spy."

"Just curious," Ward replied.

"We're part of what the brass calls Operation Bandstand," Sutton said. "A German resistance group called Freedom Action Bavaria is planning to take over Bavaria from the Nazis, but they want the Allies to help them out with an airborne

assault."

Sutton paused, remembering the words of the intelligence officer who had prepared them for the mission. "Our side doesn't want to risk too much helping those Resistance guys kick out the Nazis, but they didn't tell the Germans that. Instead, we've leaked word to both Freedom Action Bavaria *and* the Nazis that a major Allied air assault will take place."

Sutton grinned. "Buddy, we're part of that gigantic airborne army of exactly one hundred and twenty-two British Commandos and American Rangers."

"Only a hundred and twenty-two?"

"Yup. It's a con. Rumor is, Churchill came up with the idea. See, we're jumping into Bavaria to raise hell so the Krauts will think a big-time attack *is* taking place. The brass hopes the Wehrmacht will pull out some of its divisions along the Rhine to reinforce Bavaria. They also hope that our little diversion will cause the Resistance fighters to come out of the woodwork and tie down the Nazis."

Ward sucked a breath deep into his lungs, shaking his head. "And to think I wanted to be a Ranger!" His intent gaze made Sutton feel that the young sergeant was imprinting his face on his memory. He wondered if Ward saw that beneath his attempt to look tough, he was struggling to contain his fear.

Ward touched Sutton's shoulder. "Better keep a tight grip on that good luck charm, Lieutenant."

At 10:31, five minutes after crossing the Rhine south of Rastatt, the P-51 fighters withdrew, hurtling off to refuel at a forward base near Metz. Two minutes

later a red flare burst from the Bandstand formation leader and the code word "Gangbusters" was repeated three times over the radio, signaling the transports to scatter and seek their individual drop zones. Eleven thousand feet below, an artillery duel stabbed the night with dozens of tiny flashes like fireflies in a field on a Midwestern summer's night.

Bouncing Betty descended, her copilot balancing slide rule, navigational charts, and stopwatch on his knees as he snapped course changes. Sergeant Ward shone a flashlight over his shoulder.

"I just can't be one hundred percent sure without a visual," the copilot said nervously. "Shit, Cal, an error of a few degrees and we'll hit the Alps."

"You're doing okay, Woody," the pilot soothed. "I reckon we'll drop 'em right on the nose." He glanced at the instrument panel clock, then checked it against his wristwatch. "Tell the jumpmaster to give 'em the warning," he told the flight engineer.

Sutton saw Ward come aft and speak to the jumpmaster. The man nodded and stood.

"Twenty minutes, guys!" he bellowed, pointing at his wristwatch.

A Ranger named Sarnoff gazed at Sutton with wide eyes, looking like a minstrel show actor with his blackened face. "Oh jeez," he said. He fished a packet of D-ration Wrigley's gum from his musette bag and offered a stick to Sutton before cramming three into his mouth. He chewed furiously, wiping sweaty palms on his baggy trousers. "Oh jeez," he repeated.

Private Holcombe lurched towards the toilet bucket in the aircraft's tail, but

didn't make it. Kneeling on the metal deck, he spewed the remnants of what the Rangers termed "The Last Supper." He rose and tottered to his seat, hands shaking so badly he barely managed to fasten the safety belt. He blinked at the man next to him.

"Airsickness," he gasped in his Alabama twang. "Happens to a lot of guys, I hear tell."

"Looks dirty," the pilot remarked. He pointed ahead where the half moon illuminated a vast wall of thunderheads streaked with lightning.

Stress aged the copilot's twenty-year-old face. "That's the storm front we were warned about."

The pilot checked the clock and airspeed indicator. "Yeah, we'll be inside it in a couple of minutes. Wish we could drop those guys over it."

An updraft buffeted the aircraft, shoving it several degrees off course. The pilot swore and corrected the compass bearing.

"We could abort if it gets too bad," the copilot said.

Cal shook his head. "And get our asses in a sling? This is a priority mission, Woody. Naw, we'll give it a try."

Violent gusts hammered *Bouncing Betty* as she sank into the seething clouds. The pilots fought the controls, relying on their few instruments as the aircraft flew blindly. Woody's gaze alternated between his scribbled computations and stopwatch. "Approach pattern!" he barked. Cal jerked a nod at the hovering flight engineer and eased back the throttles.

Sutton felt the aircraft's wings vibrate as the engines slowed and the C-47 tilted downwards. Then the jumpmaster was beside him.

"Five minutes, Lieutenant."

Sutton rose, swallowing to free his voice. "Action stations!"

The men fastened helmet straps and tightened harnesses as the flight engineer and jumpmaster moved towards the cargo door.

"What the hell?" Woody yelled. Cal's eyes swept the windshield, widening at a kaleidoscope of sparks flecking the glass. Beyond, the aircraft's nose was bathed in an eerie glow. He glanced out a side window, seeing the same bluish flame flickering along the port wing.

"It-it's only St. Elmo's Fire," he said, quavering voice betraying his doubt. "Happens when you're flying through a charged atmosphere like this thunderstorm. Nothing to worry about."

Woody continued to watch, mesmerized by the ghostly display.

"Glad *you* think so," he said hoarsely.

"Stick up, hook up!" the jumpmaster boomed.

Sutton steadied himself and clipped the hook of his parachute strop to the steel cable running the length of the ceiling. The cargo door was open now, the engine noise almost drowning the jumpmaster's shouted commands.

"Check equipment!"

Sutton, as leader of the stick, faced the doorway. The jumpmaster moved

past them, checking the fastenings of the strops to the cable by pulling at the "D" hooks. The Rangers swayed, gripping the aluminum safety bars to keep their balance as the storm-tossed aircraft yawed and shook. Sutton saw sparks shooting past the black maw of the doorway.

All eyes watched the light panel over the door. Although he was expecting the two minute red warning light, Sutton tensed when it came on.

"Stand in the doorway!" the jumpmaster yelled.

Heart pounding, Sutton shuffled forward, the bulky parachute pack jouncing against his thighs. Then he was at the doorway, fingers hooked into the perforated jambs, hunched against the shrieking gale outside. He could see the tip of the aircraft's horizontal stabilizer shimmering with phosphorescent light. The metal skin of the aircraft hummed ethereally, rising in volume like a celestial chorus.

An uncanny prickling raised the hairs on the back of Sutton's neck. He wondered if it was a premonition of death.

"Knots one-oh-eight," Cal called. "Twelve hundred feet!"

"Roger!" Woody released the supply canisters from racks on the transport's belly, then punched a button turning the jump light to green.

An enormous thunderclap shook the aircraft. At that moment the electric blue glow shrouding *Bouncing Betty* intensified along with the humming sound. Sparks crackled throughout the cockpit. The aircraft's radio went dead and the compass spun like a demented top. Cal's jaw fell open, fingers tightening on the control yoke as the airplane seemed to plummet into a void. Ears ringing, he frantically scanned

the instrument panel, watching its gauges fluctuate. A spasm of nausea wrenched his gut.

"Woody!" he gasped, glancing at the copilot before returning to the instrument panel. His eyes widened. The banks of red-lighted instruments were now functioning perfectly, every needle steady. "Wh-what the fuck was that?"

Woody bit his lower lip to control its trembling. "Felt like we took a direct hit!"

Cal shook his head, feeling vertigo like oxygen deprivation. He figured that the phenomenon had lasted several seconds, roughly the length of time it took for the parachutists to leave the aircraft.

"Dunno," he said, "but that weird St. Elmo's Fire is gone."

Ward stuck his head between the pilots' seats. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Cal replied. "What about our passengers?"

"They've jumped. Out as clean as a whistle."

"God bless 'em," Woody said. "Let's get the hell out of here and back home where we belong."

Cal banked *Bouncing Betty* into a turn and climbed out of the storm. From the corner of his eye, he saw Woody shake his left wrist, then lean forward and rap on the instrument panel clock. "Hey," the copilot said, "let me borrow your watch. Both mine and the aircraft's have stopped."

Cal pushed up his sleeve. Surprise tightened his features.

"Mine's stopped too."

"Hey," added Ward, "so's mine."

Two days later, *Bouncing Betty's* crew gathered in a country pub. Cal rambled drunkenly about the strange phenomena and instrument failure while Woody watched a trio of WAAFs at the bar. But Jim Ward drank quietly, wondering what had caused every timepiece aboard the aircraft on the Bandstand mission to irreparably stop at 11:08 P.M.

Bandstand proved to be a failure, one of history's footnotes. Nearly three-quarters of the 122 British and American commandos involved were killed or captured, the bedraggled survivors eventually linking up with General Patch's Seventh Army as it rolled through Bavaria. The Bandstand commando attacks were too sporadic to convince the Germans that they were part of a major Allied airborne assault. No *Wehrmacht* units were withdrawn from the German divisions along the Rhine and the resistance fighters remained underground. The anti-Nazi movement called Freedom Action Bavaria failed to wrest Munich from the Nazis.

The war ended weeks later. Prisoner of War camp records and Graves Registration investigations provided information on those members of the Bandstand operation listed as Missing in Action. By September 1945, all but six of the commandos were accounted for.

Those six men were the members of the US 2nd Ranger Battalion's "Fox" team, commanded by First Lieutenant Arthur Sutton.

On April 22, 1946, one year and one day after the six Fox team members were last seen, the US Army declared the men legally dead.

In West Kankakee, Illinois; Loachapoka, Alabama; Philadelphia and Brooklyn, families acknowledged the end of a year's desperate hope and placed the customary gold stars in their windows.

In Fair Lawn, New Jersey, the uncle and brothers of Staff Sergeant Hugo Roth recited *Yizkor* for him and the twenty-seven other members of their family who had perished at the hands of the Nazis.

On a humid June day in 1946, a pre-war Chevy pickup bounced along a rutted farm track in Jackson County, Missouri. The driver, a recently demobbed sailor named Merle, glanced at the young woman beside him.

“Perfect day for a picnic, ain’t it?”

“I guess,” Elaine replied, flapping a paper fan while her jaw gyrated on a wad of chewing gum.

They parked by an isolated pond. Leaving on the truck’s radio, Merle lifted a picnic basket out of the pickup’s bed while Elaine spread a GI surplus blanket on the ground. Merle uncapped a thermos and poured a generous measure into a pair of metal cups, wondering if Elaine would notice that the lemonade was spiked with gin.

Before long they were lying on the blanket with Elaine’s Montgomery Ward blouse undone and Merle’s hand creeping up her thigh. Just as his fingers snagged the elastic band of her panties, Elaine heard a song on the radio, a hit by a young singer named Perry Como.

Till the End of Time. The song's title caused a twinge of sadness as an image of Art Sutton surfaced behind her closed eyes. She briefly wondered what had happened to him after his letters stopped coming over a year before.

"Well, life goes on," she thought, arching her hips to help Merle remove her underwear.

While Elaine was relinquishing her virginity, a memorial service was being held at the First Baptist Church in Lee's Summit.

The old church was crowded. The scent of cheap colognes mixed with the aroma of mothballs. Tears mingled with sweat to saturate handkerchiefs. Little boys in choking collars fidgeted. Little girls tried to catch the eyes of the little boys. The town's last surviving Civil War veteran fainted. Yet all eyes turned in sympathy to the elderly couple weeping in the front pew as the preacher begged repose for the immortal soul of their only grandson, Arthur Sutton.

Decades passed. Other wars flared and were extinguished. Young Americans disappeared into freezing Korean mud, fertilized Vietnamese rice paddies, and expired in Afghan valleys. Aging World War II veterans forgot the boredom and fear of their youth, wistful for the camaraderie and sense of purpose. Memories faded like photographs of lost soldiers gathering dust in attics and closets.

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Lt. Arthur Sutton hit the ground like a sack of corn dropped from a silo. Breathless and disoriented, he lay on the cold earth and watched lightning vein the sky. He whispered a prayer of thankfulness to be alive. The jump had been the most harrowing he had experienced, like being sucked into a Kansas twister, pummeled by shrieking winds. He seemed to have fallen for miles with his senses numbed, even though he knew that the low altitude drop could only have taken seconds.

Now I know what Dorothy felt like. Except I'm somewhere a lot more dangerous than Munchkinland.

Dizziness hit him and he sat with his head between his knees. Wind billowed his parachute, jerking him backwards. Stark fear galvanized him. He climbed unsteadily to his feet, collapsing the canopy and fumbling for its harness coupling.

Thunder clapped as the storm moved east into Czechoslovakia. A dog howled in the distance. Sutton stiffened, remembering Grandma's tales about dogs howling when spirits walked. *Goddamit, I'm alive and mean to stay so!*

He unclipped his Thompson submachine gun and slung it over a shoulder then wadded the parachute into a ball and tucked it under his arm. Sutton revolved slowly on his heel, pushing his senses to overcome the muzziness. He wondered where his men were. In such conditions, it would be a miracle if they had landed in their drop zone.

A breeze brushed his face, bringing with it the tang of cow dung. Cattle lowed, their bells tinkling. He heard another sound in the mist, the faint jangle of military equipment. Sutton flung himself flat, wet grass tickling his nostrils. More noises, muttering voices. Then the sharp *click-clack* of a tin cricket. Repeated. Sutton felt for the tin cricket taped to the stock of his Thompson and answered the recognition signal. Four figures materialized from the darkness.

"Here!" Sutton thrust himself up. A face pushed close to his.

"Lieutenant?" asked Roth.

"Yeah." Sutton squinted at the four figures. "Who's missing?"

"Sarnoff. He was behind you in the stick, so he should be nearby."

Sutton expelled a breath and peered at the luminous dial of his wristwatch.

"23:08. Let's find those supply canisters before we start hunting for Sarnoff."

He swung around, pointing. "You men landed up there, so the supplies should be back that way. Okay, line abreast. Move out."

They felt their way across the pasture. Sutton halted the men to check his compass, then swung the line on a tangent. Seconds later they found the first supply canister. Sitting astride it was a helmeted figure. The man jerked up his head as Roth snapped his toy cricket. A mouthful of white teeth shone in the blackened face.

"Why didn't you answer the signal?" Roth hissed. "You're lucky we didn't cut your throat!"

"Shit, Sarge," Sarnoff replied groggily, "ever since I jumped I've felt like I was concussed by a near miss from an eighty-eight. Head's spinning, ears ringing like crazy."

"Cut the chatter," Sutton ordered, wondering why Sarnoff had experienced the same strange symptoms that he had. The thought was quelled by the activity of lugging the metal cylinder into the pine forest bordering the field.

Roth took three men to sweep the pasture for the second canister. Sutton and Holcombe unfolded their shovels and dug a shallow trench beneath a tall evergreen that could serve as a landmark. They dragged the cylinder into the hole. Holcombe held a GI elbowed flashlight while Sutton unbuckled the straps securing the lid, revealing packets of food, explosives, medical supplies, and pre-loaded clips of .45 caliber ammunition.

Sutton finished packing C3 plastic explosives and detonators into backpacks as Roth and the others trudged into the clearing. They lowered the other heavy canister into the trench.

"Okay, cover the supplies." Sutton checked his watch. "Just be sure we can find 'em again when we need to." He led Roth aside. They crouched as Sutton took a waterproof packet of maps from his jacket. He spread a map across the ground and laid his compass on it.

"If we landed on target we should be here" - Sutton's finger stabbed a tiny rectangle labeled DZ - "four miles south-southeast of Kötzing." He aligned the

compass along the drop zone mark, using the ruler to measure the distance to a red square marked with a numeral one. "The panzer depot should be a mile and a half due south."

Sutton glanced up as the four other men appeared from the darkness.

"Any questions?" he asked as he refolded the map.

"What if we landed in the wrong place?" Roth said.

"Then we figure out where we are and choose the next closest target with an "A" rating. There are supposed to be thirty targets within a ten-mile radius."

Roth grunted, intent on screwing a silencer onto the barrel of a Walther P-38 pistol. Sutton set off through the pine trees, the other men following with Roth bringing up the rear.

Tension had robbed Sutton of sleep for the past two nights, but at that moment, tramping through the German forest, he had never felt more alert, so much a warrior. Adrenaline fired his blood, burning off the last traces of dizziness from the parachute jump, heightening his senses so sight, sound, and smell took on new dimensions. He remembered childhood war games in the familiar woods of Missouri. Now the game was real: a special mission for his country from which he would return a hero.

A fantasy picture flashed across his mind: a *Movietone* newsreel of himself standing at attention as President Truman - another fellow Missourian - looped the Medal of Honor over his head and Elaine watched, eyes shining, smiling the way she would when he returned to Lee's Summit and swept her into his arms again. His chest swelled, and for a moment he forgot his fear.

The men skidded and clutched at branches as the dank pine forest sloped downwards. Then the trees ended. Sutton ran down an embankment and onto a narrow road. He glanced left and right as his team hurried across to him.

"Looks like we hit the right place," Roth whispered. "This road was on the map."

"We'll know for sure in a minute." Sutton trotted up the road.

He halted after a few hundred yards. The others bunched around him, squinting at a Bavarian religious shrine marking a crossroads. Christ's pink-painted toes peeked from a bouquet of wilted flowers. Sutton pointed to a nearby post with yellow signs sprouting from its side: Kötztig 8 km, Arnbruck 17 km, Cham 39 km.

"Guess those flyboys really know their stuff." Sutton's voice betrayed his relief. "Dropped us right on the button. The panzer depot is just a quarter mile up that road." He thrust an arm towards a field stretching away into the darkness. "We'll cut across there. I want everyone crawling the moment we see the compound. Move it."

They started across the field at a lumbering run. The heavy canvas sack of explosives chafed Sutton's shoulder through his wool shirt and jacket. Soil balled on his boots, hampering his progress. The field ended and they struggled up a knoll crowded with spruce trees. Sutton reached the crest first, flinging himself to the ground.

"Down!" he rasped.

Fifty yards away, across a denuded firing zone, a ten-foot steel mesh fence ran diagonally. Triple-strand barbed wire jutted from the barrier's top, lit at hundred-

yard intervals by arc lamps. Beyond the fence loomed the shadowy outlines of buildings, some showing light at their windows.

"Haven't the Krauts heard of blackouts?" Sarnoff muttered. "Shit, with them lights this place is a sitting duck for bombers."

Sutton had his binoculars out, a frown creasing his forehead.

"Those intel officers said there'd be a strict blackout here," he whispered. "This is going to be a bitch to get into without any cover."

Sutton traversed the cleared ground in front of them, checking for the humps of mines before raising the binoculars to the military buildings beyond the wire. A sentry appeared, patrolling at the farthest reaches of his vision, a dark figure in a distinctive *Wehrmacht* helmet, the barrel of his rifle a line above his shoulder.

"You think that ground is mined?" asked Roth.

"Looks okay. Can't see any humps. The bright boys in Scotland seem to have been right about that at least."

The sweep of Sutton's field glasses stopped at the camp's main gate, a white concrete blockhouse dividing the access road, with black and white striped barrier poles on either side. An empty flagpole was planted in front of the building with a large sign beside it. Sutton strained to read the sign's black letters, managing, at that distance, to only pick out the enlarged words at the top.

"Höhenbogen Kaserne," he said, lowering the binoculars.

"Maintenance depot for the Eleventh Panzer Division," added Roth.

"We still goin' in?" asked Sarnoff.

"You bet." Sutton pointed. "The darkest part of the fence is dead center

between those lights. We'll go through the wire there."

He glanced around the grim faces, then began divesting himself of webbing belts and equipment. The others did likewise, retaining only their weapons. Sutton slipped a pair of wire cutters into a pocket and checked his watch while Roth distributed explosives from a canvas backpack. "Only seven minutes past midnight, so we're doing great." He wondered if the others could hear his pounding heart. "Okay, you guys know the drill." He settled his helmet on his head and began slithering on his belly towards the fence.

Stones and roots tugged at his clothing, grinding into his chest and groin. His breath came in spurts and he blinked his eyes, expecting the flash and agony of an exploding mine. Then he was at the fence, its heavy gauge mesh rearing above him. He felt naked under the arc lamps, cursing the blinding brightness that prevented him from seeing the sentry patrol path that ran along the perimeter fence.

He dragged the wire cutters from his pocket and opened the tungsten steel clippers to bite the first wire strand. Roth was beside him, his own cutters snipping a neat line up the mesh.

They finished together. Roth pulled out the rectangular piece of cut wire and laid it aside. Sutton hugged his submachine gun to his chest, rolled onto his back, and poked his head into the narrow opening, shoulder blades undulating to wriggle his body inside.

Roth clasped his arm, strong fingers restraining him. Sutton froze, ears and eyes straining.

Boots crunched on gravel, approaching from the right.

2

Roth gripped Sutton's jacket to drag him from the aperture in the fence.

As Sutton cleared the wire, he rolled onto his belly. Roth's helmet tapped against his, the elongated barrel of the sergeant's silenced pistol inches from Sutton's face.

"I will take care of him," Roth whispered.

"Only if he sees the hole," hissed Sutton. "You can't risk a shot from this position."

The footsteps came closer, scuffing the gravel. Sutton pressed into the ground, trying, as the commando instructors had taught him, to imagine himself part of the landscape. Roth lay so close that the hot air from his lungs warmed Sutton's face.

Sutton allowed only his eyes to move, flicking between the tread of the sentry's boots to Roth's pistol. He noticed the sergeant's hand trembling.

Boots less than two yards away. The sentry trudged nearer, steps erratic, scattering gravel chips. A pebble clinked against Sutton's steel helmet.

The sentry was almost in front of them now, tan boots and camouflage trousers in sharp detail, face shadowed by the Nazi helmet's rim. The boots dragged again, then halted directly in front of the hole cut through the fence.

Sutton saw Roth's hand steady as he took aim at the sentry's head. They heard the click of what sounded like a lighter. The pungent odor of cigarette smoke filled the air. Sutton thought it seemed impossible that the sentry would risk possible intruders seeing the red glow of his cigarette, but then the entire camp was supposed to be under blackout.

The sentry suddenly began speaking. Roth's tightening trigger finger froze. He and Sutton glanced at each other in disbelief as they heard the man softly recite what sounded like an incoherent poem in fractured English while shuffling in a strange dance routine:

Yo, I'm runnin' through these ho's like Drano

I got that devilish flow, rock 'n' roll, no halo

We party rock, yeah, that's the crew that I'm reppin'

On the rise to the top, no lead in our zeppelin, hey

The sentry made some whooshing noises, nodded his head, then threw the butt of his cigarette to the ground and mashed it with his boot. He yawned, seemed to adjust something on his ears under the helmet, then bobbed away.

Sutton realized that he had been holding his breath. He expelled it as the tread of the sentry's boots faded. There was no time to consider the man's odd behavior now. He slithered back up to the opening in the wire and propelled himself through, rising without breaking motion into a crouching run that brought him to the

deep shadows under the wall of a building. The Rangers behind him hurled themselves against the wall at five-second intervals.

Sutton visualized the panzer depot's layout from among the two dozen target plans he had memorized over the past weeks. Followed by the others, he sidled to the end of the building and peered around the corner. The terrain was like the plan said it would be: an unlighted alley running past vehicle maintenance sheds until it ended at a parking lot for repaired vehicles at the far end.

Sutton darted from the sheltering wall. The vehicle park was surrounded by a rusted mesh fence - an unnecessary precaution, as the huge double gate yawned wide, one side crumpled as if a careless driver had collided with it. The repaired vehicles were segregated into columns of tanks, trucks and personnel carriers. Lampposts cast ineffectual pools of light at wide intervals, illuminating olive drab paint, white stars, and the large, stenciled letters *US ARMY*.

Sutton skidded to a halt, wondering if his eyes were deceiving him. He heard the gasping breaths of the other men as they slid against the wall beside him.

"What is it?" Roth asked. He saw the vehicles. So did the other four men.

"Holy shit!" someone hissed.

"What the fuck do you think--"

"Silence!" Roth snapped. He moved closer to Sutton.

"What gives, Lieutenant? These are all American vehicles."

"Don't know," Sutton said. "The briefing officers said nothing about this."

He studied the ranks of machines, bafflement growing. He pointed at a row of tanks, their cannon barrels raised like a lancer's salute.

"Never seen tanks like those before. They can't be ours, or British for that matter."

Roth grunted an assent. "They look more like German King Tigers – the *Panzerkampfwagen* Six. Must be a new type that our intelligence doesn't know about yet." Roth thrust his jaw towards the parking area. "Most of the other vehicles are unknown to me also. But why are they all painted to look like Americans?"

Something nagged at Sutton's mind, a memory of an article in *Stars and Stripes*, a story given substance by conversations with men who had served in the Battle of the Bulge five months earlier.

"It's a Kraut trick. Armored columns painted to look like they're Americans. They used that trick at the Bulge last Christmas. Really fooled our guys. Even had English-speaking Krauts in our uniforms."

"I'll be damned," Sarnoff muttered. "I remember hearing about that from a guy who was at Bastogne. Dirty motherfuckers!"

"Our fighter pilots will sure think twice before attacking 'em," Sutton added. "Let's make sure they never get out of here! Rendezvous where we left our gear in fifteen minutes."

They separated at the vehicle park gate, each man intent on his assigned task and the few minutes allotted him. Sutton ran down a lane between a row of tanks and a mixed column of self-propelled guns and armored personnel carriers.

Choosing a tank at random, he knelt beneath the engine carapace at its rear. He took a sausage-shaped piece of plastic explosive from his shoulder bag, stuck it to the armor plating and affixed a pencil detonator. He snatched up the bag of

explosives and raced to another vehicle.

Sutton attached the last of his twelve explosive charges to the treads of a self-propelled howitzer, then feverishly checked his watch. Three minutes to the rendezvous. He reached the damaged gate at the same time as Roth and a private named Kemp. They trotted back down the alley, hugging the walls until they reached the barracks. Roth halted, delving into his shoulder bag.

"One last gift for the Nazis." He pressed an explosive charge against the brick wall over his head.

The three other Rangers were waiting for them on the knoll overlooking the camp, buckled into their web harness. Despite the extreme tension, Sutton sensed a feeling of professional satisfaction behind the blackened masks of their faces.

"Nice work, guys," he said.

"Will we hit the Nightfighter base next?" Roth asked.

"It's the next closest target." Sutton squinted at his watch. The time was 00:31 on the morning of April 22. "Wouldn't want the Luftwaffe to feel neglected, would we?"

Sutton felt a surge of pride as he watched his men fall into line. Maybe the Welsh instructor had been wrong -- perhaps their chances of returning alive were better than he'd said.

The Rangers set off at a ground-eating trot led by Sutton. After a few minutes he recalled the strange poem of the Germany sentry.

He slowed, allowing the other men to pass him until he could walk beside Roth. "What was up with that sentry?" he asked in a low voice so the others

wouldn't hear. "With the guy's mumbo-jumbo?"

Roth didn't look at him.

"*Einen Wahnsinnige* – a madman!" he replied derisively. "The Nazis must be so short of recruits that they are emptying the asylums!" He grunted as he shifted his heavy pack. "If I was his sergeant, I would have him shot for smoking on duty. Of course, he'll be shot tomorrow anyway after they receive our gifts."

3

Höhenbogen Kaserne, Bavaria

April 22, 2011

None of the 197 men and women of the Arkansas Army National Guard's 224th Maintenance Company had any idea that Höhenbogen Kaserne had been a German Panzer base over half a century earlier, and few would have cared anyway. The camp was one of several dozen NATO bases left over from the Cold War. Largely forgotten by the US Defense Department, Höhenbogen was used to store rusting, nearly obsolete military vehicles ostensibly maintained by National Guard troops.

Like his comrades, 19-year-old Private Doug “Beamer” Kimble of Little Rock was grateful to serve his tour of duty in Germany instead of Afghanistan, even if he was nearly bored out of his effin’ mind. It was still better than playing video games in the basement of his parents’ home or temporary jobs stocking shelves at big box stores. Fortunately, neither the officers nor the NCOs seemed to mind him smoking on sentry duty (as long as it wasn’t weed), or listening to his iPod.

Beamer finished his circuit of the camp perimeter and went into a latrine to take a leak. Under his PASGT helmet – still worn by some Army National guard units who called it a “Fritz” for its resemblance to World War II *Wehrmacht* headgear - he adjusted his ear buds, replaying LMFAO’s *Party Rock Anthem*. He shuffled in a little Party Rock dance while he relieved himself.

The first explosion tore a five-foot hole into the latrine’s wall, scattering bricks and plaster. Although knocked out by the blast, Beamer’s urinal was shielded by a row of toilet stalls and his only injuries were concussion, minor lacerations and soiled underwear.

Another blast came seconds later. A team from the US Army’s Criminal Investigation Command (CID) later confirmed that the blast originated from approximately 400 grams of plastic explosive. It detonated against the fuel tank of a Humvee, leaving the vehicle a blazing hulk. The next three explosions occurred within less than a minute.

The unit commanding officer, Dean Kozak - a middle-aged major whose real career was as an E-Z Mart produce manager in Texarkana – sat up in bed. A loud WHAM rattled his quarter’s windows. Rubbing his eyes, Kozak staggered to the

window as more explosions rocked the base. Mouth agape, he incomprehensibly watched mushrooms of flame leaping from the area of the vehicle park.

The general alarm went off as Major Kozak struggled into his pants. The telephone rang and he hopped across the room to answer it.

"D-duty Officer, sir," a panicked young voice gasped. "Are we under attack?"

"*Attack?*" Kozak gulped. The Standing Orders for Emergency Situations were locked in a safe in his office on the other side of the Kaserne and he couldn't remember what the classified document said to do in such a situation. *Don't want to jump the gun*, he thought. *Could just be a gas main leak.*

A WOOMP rolled over the camp as a gasoline tanker erupted into a gigantic fireball, galvanizing Kozak into action. He ordered the base evacuated, then opened his government issued Panasonic Toughbook CF-31 and typed an encrypted email with "Emergency Situation – Höhenbogen Kaserne" in the subject line:

Multiple explosions from unknown cause. Probable extensive damage. Facility being evacuated.

Kozak sent the message to Command Post, US Army Europe (USAREUR) V Corps, Campbell Barracks, Heidelberg, adding the email addresses of his own commanding officer at the nearby Höhenfels garrison, and the 66th Military Intelligence Group (66th MI) in Wiesbaden. He finished dressing and buckled on his holstered M9 pistol. Taking his Toughbook and smartphone, he scurried out of his quarters as a pair of explosions lifted the turret off an Abrams M1A1 tank and gutted the cab of a recovery vehicle.

In a pasture a mile from Höhenbogen Kaserne, six young Americans in World War II combat gear paused as explosions awakened the Bavarian countryside. They watched distant flames illuminate the clouds, looked at each other ... and grinned in grim satisfaction.

End Excerpt.

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