

May 14, 1944

"Okay, so here's the deal, and listen carefully!"

Sergeant Duncan pushed the front of his helmet up and looked at his clipboard. "What we're going to do today is go to the ship, go down the rope ladders into the boat, and then go up the ladder back onto the ship. The brass wants to know how long it's going to take you to get back on the ship in case there's a last-minute change of plans."

"We're going to be marching all the way to the pier?" Gomez was short, but he looked like the hero in a Western movie.

"What, you got something better to do, pretty boy?"

"No, just wondering, Sarge."

"For some reason they're going to send some trucks to pick us up and take us to the boats," Duncan went on. "We're going to run

through the exercise, and then they'll bring us back. General Gerhardt doesn't want Gomez to exhaust himself!"

"When are they going to stop reading our mail?" Kroll asked. "My girl feels like the Army is made up of Peeping Toms."

"Kroll, the only letters you get are from your mother, and she just writes because she's bored waiting for this thing to kick off."

"The whole battalion is going to get on the boats, then climb back on the ship?" I asked.

"I don't know, Woody, but when the colonel comes by, I'll tell him you have a question for him, okay?" Sergeant Duncan gave me the look and spit on the ground. "And wash your face before we start off; you don't want to scare any of the Navy guys. Any more questions?"

There was a lot of grumbling, but no questions.

"This is one of those stupid exercises they pull just so it looks good on paper," Sergeant Duncan said. "It's a wonder they don't have a bunch of Krauts standing around with stopwatches."

"If it's a maneuver to save our butts one day, you'll be glad to have the practice under our belt." MacIntyre was thirty, one of the oldest men in our outfit.

"Mac, are you practicing to be somebody's grandmother?" Sergeant Duncan asked. "Because that's *just* how you sound."

Duncan told us to relax until the trucks came. I had just settled on my cot with a bag of peanuts and a soda when the whistle blew

to get up. I slung my backpack over one shoulder and went out with the others.

“Here they come,” Gomez said, pointing down the road. “There’s only about eight trucks, so it can’t be the whole battalion going.”

The trucks stopped about a hundred yards from where we were.

“What are they waiting for?” Gomez again.

“Probably waiting for some officer to get his fingers out of his rear end and tell them to start,” Duncan said.

“They’re moving again!” Minkowitz was blade thin and looked out of place in a uniform.

The trucks were standard two-and-a-half-ton jobs, or deuce and a halves, as Duncan called them. They came in a close file, and then all made a simultaneous left turn so that they were facing away from us.

“They call that soldiering in Transportation,” Sergeant Duncan said. “I call it bullshit.”

“It’s a black outfit,” Stagg said. “Probably from Fort Meade.”

“Nah, they keep all the Negroes down at Gordon in Georgia,” Duncan said.

A driver and a passenger got out of each truck and stood at parade rest next to his vehicle. It was pretty sharp but, like the sergeant said, it wasn’t much that anyone else couldn’t have done. I thought I recognized one of the drivers. I looked closer as the Colored crews were given the command and opened the back tarpaulin flaps.

The one I thought I knew glanced over to where we stood. I did know him.

“Marcus!” I started toward him and saw him frown at first, then watched the frown turn into a big smile.

“Josiah Wedgewood! What the hell are you doing over here?” Marcus Perry put out his hand, and I grabbed it. “They gotta be desperate if they’re going to let you do any of the fighting.”

“They called me special to come over here and clean the Nazis out,” I said. “You hear anything from home?”

“My mom said that they’re rationing food up in Richmond,” Marcus said. “How about you?”

“Man, Bedford, Virginia, seems like a whole lifetime ago,” I said. “How long you been in England?”

“Two months of sitting around doing nothing,” Marcus said.

“You still infantry?” I asked.

“No, I never was,” Marcus said. “They sent me up to Fort Dix, and then down to Meade. I’ve been cleaning trucks night and day. I don’t know if they expect us to drive them or sell them to the Germans. How about you?”

“Still infantry, still 29th. I got over here eight months ago and I’m ready for some action,” I said. “I’d like to tell my folks what England looks like, but they won’t let us put anything in our letters about where we are.”

“Same here.” Marcus leaned against the side of his truck. “Hey, wait, I did hear something from home. You know the Martin kid?