

Truce Dog

by Michael Houldsworth

“At half past one this afternoon, sir?”

“At half past one, lieutenant,” said the colonel.

The lieutenant looked down and scuffed at a loose cobblestone with the toe of his boot.

“They won’t be expecting that, sir.”

“No, lieutenant, they won’t. All of us at once.”

The lieutenant looked up and studied the three hundred metres of flat ground and yellow wild-flowers between him and the British fortifications. There was a very good reason why the British would not be expecting a frontal attack across that ground in broad daylight. He cleared his throat and tried again.

“Perhaps at night time, sir?”

“No, lieutenant. The men need to be able to see what they’re doing.

“Indeed, sir.”

The lieutenant looked away again, his eyes drawn back to the enemy fortifications and the haze of yellow with the blue sea shining beyond. The lieutenant knew exactly where the British machine guns were, and there were many of them. The colonel was looking at him curiously.

“You seem reluctant, lieutenant.”

No, sir.” He fought to keep his voice level against the sickness that was rising in his stomach. “But the men will think it strange to be attacking in the middle of the day. There’s no cover out there.” He forced himself to look at the colonel’s handsome, stupid face.

“That’s very true, lieutenant. But as I said, they won’t be expecting it.

They will still be sitting drinking tea and playing cards when we arrive right on top of them. Silence and surprise will be the key.”

Idiot, thought the lieutenant. The British would certainly be drinking tea or playing cards or sleeping, but he knew they were good soldiers, and it was going to take his men at least two minutes to get across that ground. Plainly the colonel wanted to make a name for himself, and there would be more rows of pretty white crosses out there in the pale Mediterranean sunlight. He was sweating slightly now.

“Are you planning some artillery fire, sir? To soften them up before we go?”

“No, no, lieutenant. No artillery,” said the colonel, smiling indulgently. “That would spoil the element of surprise.”

He speaks as though to a child, thought the lieutenant. He looked along the line of the trench where his men sat smoking and talking softly in the sunshine. Some were shirtless and lay back in canvas chairs they had found in the town. They laughed and read books, but he knew their casual appearance was deceptive. They were all veterans of the Russian front.

The lieutenant also knew that his men regarded this posting as the next best thing to being out of the war. If you were captured or wounded here, you knew that British would take good care of you - they fought hard, but there was none of the chilling hatred of the Russians, and a kind of unofficial truce had developed in this isolated island outpost. If you don't bother us, we won't bother you, was the attitude, and after the shrieking hell of Russia the men loved it. Yesterday someone in the British lines had help up a can on the end of a stick and the men had joined the British in laughing and calling an uncomplimentary commentary as their best shots had repeatedly missed the swaying target. In the end, even the men with haunted eyes had laughed. It was the uncomplicated kind of humour that his men liked and he had seen them shaking their heads in delight. “Those British!” they had said, and any further sniping at the British lines had been half-hearted at best. But everyone knew that it was death to go out into the open ground in front of the trench.

And now there was the new colonel from Berlin. His men did not like the new colonel, who was a Nazi and had an enthusiasm for war that the officers found distasteful.

“Area Command wants to see a more aggressive attitude in this sector, lieutenant” the colonel was saying, and his voice was suddenly curt. “Have your men ready at one o'clock”. And then he was striding off along the trench, uneasy among these veterans, pausing with a machine-gun crew to joke and draw some awkward laughter.

“He hates them, and his stupidity is going to kill them,” he said, and the sergeant, who had been listening, stood shaking his head in agreement. The lieutenant rubbed his forehead with his fingers, hiding his eyes. Five minutes ago he had been able to forget.

“Please inform the men, sergeant,” he said, looking at his watch.

The sun was high in the sky and the cool of morning was gone. The lieutenant looked along the trench. His men were hunched silently in their grey uniforms against the front wall of the trench. He knew everything about them. They had started with eight hundred men in Russia.

The lieutenant looked through his binoculars at the dog. In the clear light of the field he could see the individual hairs on the animal's shaggy coat as it wandered among the

yellow flowers one hundred and fifty metres away. It was a nice-looking dog, clearly someone's pet.

It had come out through a gap in the British barbed wire with the purposeful air of a dog that is bored, and was sniffing aimlessly among the yellow flowers.

Then the head and shoulders of a soldier appeared above the sandbags of the British lines, looking at the dog and calling out, obviously wanting the dog to come back. His voice came thinly to the lieutenant on the slight breeze from the sea. Probably the animal's owner, he thought. He must be very upset, to be showing himself as such an easy target. He looked at his sniper, who had shifted restlessly at the sight and was now gazing resolutely up at the blue sky. The Englishman disappeared back into the safety of his trench. He looked back at the dog, which was wandering happily in the field of flowers. The soldiers crouched on both sides of him remained silent, but he knew they were mostly rural people who would be hoping the dog would return to its owner.

He became aware of the colonel standing by his shoulder.

"Where is your unit's sniper, lieutenant?" he said, in the voice of a man who has had a pleasant thought.

The lieutenant looked at his sniper, who was pointedly scraping some dirt from the butt of his rifle with a thumbnail and looking anywhere except in the direction of the English.

"I say it again, lieutenant - where is your sniper?"

"My sniper is right here, sir," said the lieutenant. "What do you want him to do?"

"Shoot the dog, of course, lieutenant. Shoot the dog." The lieutenant stared at him. Everyone froze, including the sniper. The fragrance of the yellow flowers came to the lieutenant on the warm breeze.

"He's not going to like that, sir,"

"I don't care if he likes it, lieutenant. He'll do as he's told!"

The lieutenant stared at his commanding officer. In Russia they had captured a village and his men had been rounding up the civilians who had survived the bombardment, mostly women; an SS captain had come up to him and had ordered him to take the people into the forest and shoot them. An ugly little confrontation had developed, with the villagers pretending not to listen, knowing what the argument was about. Then his men had gathered around the two of them in a circle that became so menacing that in the end the officer had gone away, and the villagers had lived. He knew that none of his men would shoot the English dog, especially the sniper.

The lieutenant shifted his feet and forced himself to keep his eyes firmly on the angry face of the colonel and his wide blue eyes.

“Yes, sir”, he said. “But it’s not exactly a worthwhile military target.”

Odd shadows flickered across the colonel’s face. Long seconds passed and the lieutenant fought to keep his gaze level and steady. Abruptly the colonel grunted and turned to the sniper.

“Give me your rifle!” he snapped. The sniper, with a glance at the lieutenant, stood up and handed his rifle to the colonel.

Pale with dislike the sniper watched the colonel preparing to shoot at the dog. Everyone else watched the dog. The colonel began firing. Through his binoculars, the lieutenant saw it raise its head curiously at the sound of each shot, oblivious to the bullets that were making the flowers around it shiver as they passed. The colonel was not a good shot, even with the telescopic sight on the rifle. The dog began moving vaguely back towards the British sandbags and the lieutenant began to hope that it might be alright. He watched the dog, willing it to go back quickly and listened as the colonel, cursing, asked the sniper for more bullets and loaded them into the magazine. But now the dog was distracted, and stood sniffing at something on the ground about four metres short of safety, a standing target, and the colonel was swinging the rifle back up. A shot, and his time the dog was down. An exhalation of breath rippled along the line of his men and then silence. He lowered the binoculars. He had been watching as the dog was flicked as if by a giant finger, out of sign down into the flowers.

He heard the colonel hum with satisfaction.

He lowered his head onto his arms and breathed the hot smell of the dirt.

It was twenty minutes past one. The dog had taken his mind off things but now it was worse. If his men got anywhere near the machine guns they would end up like the dog.

Then the English soldier was back on the sand-bags, this time standing and looking uncertainly towards the German lines; at the same moment, they heard the shrieking of the dog. It had survived, but must be badly hurt. He raised his binoculars again to study the unusual sight of an enemy soldier standing on top of his own fortification. The man had dark hair and seemed very young. The dog’s shrill screaming was rising to an agonizing note. As he watched, the Englishman waved his arms in two big arcs and jumped down into the yellow field. He thinks that his waving will cancel our obligation to shoot, thought the lieutenant. He’s going to rescue his dog. He looked at the men nearest them. None had raised their rifle; they were intent on the progress of the English dog-owner and watching the colonel to see what he would do.

The colonel had seen the English soldier and was raising his rifle again. No, thought the lieutenant. Please don’t do that. He glanced back at the soldier, who had reached the dog and was crouching over it. As he stood up with the dog limp in his arms, the colonel fired his first shot. A low angry murmur rustled along the line of his men, but it was a miss. The man half ducked as he heard the bullet hit the sandbags behind him. The colonel, oblivious, half raised himself in his eagerness and fired another shot.

“I’ve got him,” he cried.

The soldier staggered and almost fell, but continued towards safety, one arm hanging limp and red and wet, but the dog in the other. The lieutenant's hands were shaking so that it was difficult to see through the binoculars. Beside him, the colonel reloaded his rifle and raised himself to fire.

"This time," he muttered. "This time."

Then there was a sound like a clay pot being dropped onto a hard floor, and when the lieutenant looked at the colonel, he was gone, sprawled backwards on the floor of the trench, a small hole in the middle of his forehead and the back of his head gone. The sound of a single shot came thinly from the British lines. A sniper, thought the lieutenant. He raised his field glasses again and watched the English soldier and his dog reach the sandbags, saw the arms reach down to help him over, and then he was gone. A feeble little cheer burst out among his own men, growing stronger, a cheer for the brave Englishman who had rescued his dog. He loved them. There would be no more blood shed today. The sergeant was beside him.

"Cancel the attack, and stand the men down," said the lieutenant softly, his eyes resting on the blue hills of the distant mainland.

The body of the colonel lay in the dust at his feet.