

Author's note: This excerpt from ***Watches Of The Night*** is comprised of three of the flashbacks to 1945 that are sprinkled throughout the book (which mostly takes place in 1962). They reveal pieces of the back story that drives ***Watches Of The Night***.

Watches Of The Night.

Chapter Three

Saturday, January 18th 1945

Ben Reese had been trucked-over, out the Ardennes, and had slept four hours total in the last three days.

Two of them the end of that afternoon when he'd slept in a tent for the first time in weeks. On a canvas cot. Under a clean dry army blanket. Burrowed in like a hibernating animal. Wrapped in the dry safe comfort of it. The peacefulness. The luxury of it that would've been hard to explain to any civilian anywhere, anytime in the last hundred years.

Now he was having trouble making himself move. Making himself wake-up and open his eyes and get ready to do it again.

But he did.

Finally. Groggy and cold. He swung his feet to the ground and sat on the edge of the cot holding his head in his hands. His scalp was sore and itchy, and he rubbed it and scratched it all over, after sitting there motionless longer than he thought he ought to.

He blew his nose on a dirty handkerchief, and worked at loosening his fingers, seized-up and stiff in the cold. Then told himself it was time. To pack-up what he'd need, and go eat whatever he could find.

He sneezed three times and rubbed his eyes, then pulled his helmet on over his dirty wool liner. He checked the knots fastening the wires around his waist under his outside coat - one wire coated with diamond dust, the other smoother and thicker.

He strapped his Colt .45 over his coat, under his right arm (the heavy 1911 Army issue Colt most G.I.s preferred) - one strap over his right shoulder, the other around his chest, grip aimed forward so he could grab it fast with his left hand.

He wiped the blade of the hatchet his dad had made him (with a curved pointed pick *and* a steel blade that he always carried on patrol). Then he slid the handle through the left side loop of the belt he wore over his hip-length

coat.

He slung his old Springfield competition rifle over his left shoulder, checked his pockets to make sure he had everything else he'd need, buttoned a fresh pack of Camels into one - and stepped out into a cold dusk in an already dark forest.

He filled a canteen with coffee in the mess tent (C.W. Washington coffee - powdered, bitter and strong), added his last half-shot of schnapps to help fight the cold, grabbed two cans of C-Rations, and walked over to the fire where the technical guys he was taking-out were talking among themselves.

Ben sat on the first folding stool he'd seen in a month, and stretched his fur lined boots close to the fire, boots he'd liberated from a dead German officer sometime in December. (Not a second too soon, either, with the cold the way it had been - with the cold the way it still was.) He drank his coffee, and ate his dinner, and listened to the technical guys talk.

One of them, Ray Mills, had just been sent in from another team, and he'd been asking about procedures, listening to the colonel in charge, a guy named Mitchell, who'd been telling them where they were going, and what they needed to find. They'd stopped that discussion as soon as Ben sat down. All he'd heard was, "Tonight's not as important a site as what we'll be getting to farther into Germany, but with the line here now . . ."

Army didn't get told what the technical types were looking for, except for the location of the site.

But Ben knew there was something wrong. Something going-on between the three of them. The third guy in the team, Willy Baylor, who'd been with Mitchell awhile - he was staring at Ray Mills while Mitchell talked, giving him a look that said, "This guy's doin' the talking, and he's in charge, but I'm telling ya, everything you need to know ain't gettin' said." Ben saw it. He could read it right there in his eyes, as though the words were printed in the air above his head.

He watched Baylor and Mills glance away from each other, silently wary, body language talking, lighting Luckys and warming their hands on their tin cups, listening to Mitchell tell them how important it was that they search the site the way he said.

Ben finished his C-Rations, cleaned the fork of his Swiss Army knife and shoved it in the coat pocket with his wire cutters, listening and looking at his watch, wondering when the new kid would decide to show-up. The scout he'd only met once, who'd been assigned to him for training more than anything else (like ninety percent of the others he'd worked with in the last two months.) It was almost twenty-one hundred hours and the kid was cutting it close.

Then he saw him, coming around the corner of a tent, crossing the camp, looking around for Ben. Ben lit a cigarette, while asking himself what the kid's name was. *Rick maybe. Something like that. No, Nick sounds closer. Maybe. I need another blast of coffee.* Ben finished the rest in the canteen as the boy

hunkered down, and said, "Hey," to Ben and held his hands toward the fire.

Ben looked across at him and nodded. "It's time we got ourselves organized. Ray Mills . . . Willy Baylor . . . Colonel Mitchell . . . they're all technical guys. Nick Costella here's a Scout." Ben pointed around the circle as he said each name, then looked at Nick again. "Ray, Willy and Colonel Mitchell are T-Forces. They're armed, but they're not Army. They haven't had combat training. And we're taking them out to a site they have orders to investigate.

"It's roughly eight kilometers northeast of here, still in woods, from the reports I've seen, in between small scattered fields, west of Schleiden and Gemund. They're SS patrols all around here, and there's no predicting them, *or* the line. Which is very fluid right now, and shifting really fast, so anything could happen."

Ben took a drag on his Camel, as he looked around at the rest of them. "Once we leave camp, there's going to be no talking. No noise of any kind. The first sound you wouldn't hear in a woods and I turn us around. Everybody got that?" Ben studied the group around the fire, making eye contact with every one of them. "Good. Okay. They'll be no smoking either, needless to say. Nothing like a Camel to bring a Kraut running." Ben smiled and inhaled his own, then stuck the butt in the snow beside his stool.

"Now, the object of this," Ben was looking at Nick, "is to get in, secure the site, let the T-Force people get whatever information they're after, and get them back here as fast as possible. With weather coming in, and patrols the way they are, we've got to get back here by four hundred hours. Five hundred at the latest. Any questions?"

Ben gazed at the group around the fire. Nick looking small, wiry, and jumpy, eating a chocolate bar and staring hard at Ben. Ted Mitchell standing, looking tall, smart and sure of himself, holding a canvas musette pack in one hand. Willy Baylor, large and calm-looking and watching Mitchell, flexing his fingers in his leather gloves, trying to get the blood moving. Ray Mills, his wire-rimmed glasses hiding his eyes, his teeth tight on his lower lip, sat fastening the straps on an empty battle pack.

Ben reached in his pocket and pulled out a small tin. "We've got a half-moon tonight with heavy cloud cover coming-and-going. A lot of the time we'll be in woods, so before we go, I've got some stuff here I'm going to put on us to help us see each other in the dark. We've got to stay together. We can't afford to get separated."

Ben unscrewed a lid and stuck his finger in a phosphorescent fluid, then dabbed it on the sight of his old Springfield, using the same finger to dot the front and back of his helmet just above the lip.

He marked the tech team's helmets too, and then turned to Nick. Who asked him what it was, and where he'd gotten it.

"You go to Scout school in Louisiana?"

"Nope. Training's lots shorter than it was."

"I used it in the Bayous there. Foxfire, *they* call it. Phosphorescent algae. This is something like it I picked-up in Holland."

"Could I speak to you a moment?" Ted Mitchell was asking Ben.

And when Ben had finished, he walked over to Mitchell and followed him away from the other men.

"Sargent, I understand that you're in charge from here on out, until we get to the site. But I want to make it very clear that there I'll be taking over."

"Right. Investigation of the site is under your command. I'll be the one to say when we pull out of the site, though, and I secure the buildings before your team goes in. If security's involved in anyway, you do have to answer to me, Colonel. If you'd like to read my orders, you may." Ben was unbuttoning a pocket inside his coat, getting ready to pull out his papers, when Mitchell shook his head.

"No, I understand, you have the responsibility for the safety of the mission. I wanted to clarify the ordering of my men once we're on site."

"They're nothing to do with me."

"Good. No offense intended, Sargent." Ted Mitchell smiled at Ben, his brown eyes careful-looking in the firelight, before he looked away.

"No offense taken, Colonel. One other thing. When your men are looking through the buildings, even if there're black-out curtains up, I want them to use flashlights, not turn on the electric lights. I've found it a useful precaution."

"Agreed. We're prepared to do that."

"Good." Ben glanced at Mitchell, then turned to the rest of the men. "I've got to check-in with headquarters, and I'm going to get some coffee. I'll be back here, ready to leave in fifteen minutes. That would be," Ben was looking at his watch, "Twenty-one-thirty hours."

The rest of them checked their watches. And then they watched Ben walk away, pulling on the fur-lined gloves he'd taken off the German with the boots.

Ben stopped and looked back again, and said, "Baylor, could I talk to you for a second?"

"Sure." Baylor walked over to where Ben waited twenty-five feet away, and walked on with him toward headquarters.

"What's the deal with you and Mills? There's something between you two and Mitchell, and I need to know if anything's going-on that'll affect how we work tonight."

"Mills is new, and he doesn't know Mitchell, and I'm not sure that -" Baylor stopped, but kept his eyes on Ben while he lit himself a Lucky Strike.

"Go on. Mitchell's not going to hear anything from me."

"He's too lucky. Three or four go out, one or two come back. Always him. Always Mitchell."

"And?" Ben was looking at him hard.

"It's like . . . I don't know, I haven't been with him that long. I've only

been over here a month, but some think he's a jinx. And some think maybe he doesn't *want* everybody to come back."

"Why? What kind of reason could he have for that?"

"I don't know, and I've thought about it plenty. One thing I do know, he always takes the labs himself. Checks-out all the scientific stuff, even though we're technical too."

"And?"

"A couple guys came back with bullets in the back."

"That can happen in a firefight. That doesn't necessarily mean -"

"I know."

"There more to it, or not?"

"I don't know what to believe, but there's something about him. He takes care of himself, that's for sure."

"Yeah, but you got to, on one level."

"Sure, it's just . . ." Baylor inhaled and looked over his shoulder at Mitchell.

"You ever come up against mines?"

"Twice."

"You tell him that's what I talked to you about, looking for mines and booby traps tonight around the site. Asking if you'd run into them before. You bring it up with him yourself, okay?"

"Okay. You expecting any?"

"If it's a military installation, you can bet on it."

"It's not."

"That's what I figured. Don't worry about it. Nick and I'll look-out for them. You go on and get ready."

Ben started off toward headquarters, watching Mitchell out the edge of his eyes. Watching Mitchell walk the other way watching Baylor the whole time.

It was quarter of eleven and dark as it'd been that night when they got to the driveway to the plant, coming at it halfway-up and sideways from out of the woods. It was mud and gravel, half-covered with dirty snow, running straight between tall fir, tire tracks and frozen footprints cut in the whole surface. Which meant there wouldn't be traps or trip wires. Making the approach easier.

Ben motioned the rest of them to stay in the shadows of the trees. And then he slid from one tree to the next toward the tall two-sided gate in the high wire fence topped with barbed wire.

He started circling the fenced-in compound, edged close by woods, examining the ground along the fence from twenty feet or so away, lying on his stomach at irregular intervals, studying the surface, looking for signs of wires or booby traps - till he'd made a careful circuit of the whole block of buildings.

He studied them too as he passed - the two old brick buildings (with black metal windows and black metal doors) built at right angles, the sheds

and garages strung along the third side, making a U-shaped courtyard with the open-end toward the gate.

There were no lights. No sounds. No dogs roaming the premises. Nothing like a military site, or a high priority scientific plant. This looked like a typical business, locally owned most likely, in the country outside a village.

It looked as though it'd been there awhile too, in the same configuration and condition. There were no signs that Ben could see that the contents had recently been moved in from a city somewhere for safety (from cities, all across Germany, being bombed every night) the way munitions and major research sites were being transported to the country.

Though this plant *was* well hidden, and at least two miles from the nearest village (which Ben had seen for himself as he scouted around the team). There was a house half-a-mile away that might've belonged to an owner or manager. Similar brick. Similar age. No chinks of light around the black-out curtains. No sounds at that hour of the night. Wisps of wood smoke in the air. Children's footprints in the yard. Car frosted over in the drive. No one up. No one out. No dog in the yard. A path leading from the plant toward the house, which Ben found, close to the front gate of the plant, as soon as he circled back to that gate - where he stopped and examined the chain and padlock.

He didn't want to cut it if he could help it. The longer the impression lasted that no outsiders had been there, the safer it'd be for everyone concerned. And he pulled out the bundle of picks he carried, and opened the lock fast. Then he slid inside the gate, motioning Nick to keep the tech team right where they were in the trees.

The large building on the left looked like offices. The biggest building, opposite the gate, with block and tackle above double doors, looked like a manufacturing plant. There was no name or logo identifying the business on either of them, or anywhere else that Ben could see.

He made a sweep of the courtyard fast.

No time wasted. No extra moves made.

And then he checked the front doorframe of what he thought was the office building for wires or detonation devices, before he picked the lock.

It was pitch dark inside, with black-out curtains across the windows. And Ben checked the rooms, one office after another, one lab after another, using a flashlight with a blue glass filter - examining every doorway and floor for wires or traps of any kind, unlocking all the drawers and cabinets before he left each room.

When he'd been through all of it, the basement up through the second floor - he walked out into the courtyard and signaled Nick to bring them in.

He waved them into the labs and offices, left Nick guarding the courtyard - and unlocked the biggest building.

There was nothing threatening there either. No trip wires. No detonators. No dogs or guards. Just glass-making furnaces. Annealing ovens. Different

kinds of glass blowing equipment - metal rods, metal shapers, chairs with metal braces for working the rods. Boxes of vacuum tube bulbs, crates of vacuum tubes in various stages of completion, spools of copper wire, wire drawing dies, spools of thread-like filament, boxes of electrodes, blocks of tungsten, boxes of tube grids and metal plates, bins of silica and potash.

There was metal fabricating equipment too. Drill presses, grinding wheels, polishing and bending tools. Stamping dyes for metal based bulbs and the bottoms of glass tubes. Piles of scrap metal. Bins of broken glass. Wood and cardboard used in shipping.

There was a metal door in the end wall, and Ben unlocked that, to a smaller room more like a lab, with electrical equipment and metal boxes and parts he couldn't name.

The technical team had been sent to Stoltz Elektronik to look for useful developments in vacuum tubes, and anything having to do with the new work being done in what would eventually come to be called "transistors". And to find out too if there was work there related to the monitoring of communication - radio, aircraft, or telephone.

No one could predict what they'd find. All the Allies knew for sure was that Herr Rudolph Stoltz, the owner and founder of Stoltz Elektronik, was a well respected audio engineer who was believed to have been on the verge of important new discoveries before Germany invaded the Sudatenland. Scientific intelligence sources, including American inventors and business developers advising the Office of Strategic Services, felt certain that Herr Stoltz' work would be well worth finding, and it was one of the many scientific firms targeted by OSS for a visit by a T-Force team.

Ted Mitchell had used the number and size of the buildings as justification for searching the labs himself, and he'd sent Baylor to examine the assembly building, leaving Mills in the first floor offices to look for research records, and material ordering records too, that showed typical ordering practices, as well as significant departures.

Mitchell stood in the main laboratory on the second floor of the office building, thinking, *At least this Scout unlocks drawers and cabinets. The others had to be told what to do* - while he scanned the cabinets and lab benches.

Mitchell looked through both with a practiced eye, considering vacuum tubes and capacitors, rolls of wire and electrical components, electrical meters and calibrators, reading lab diaries as he went (having taken eight years of German).

He spent the most time on the lab books. And it didn't take him long to see that if there *was* break-through work being done at Stoltz Elektronik it wasn't being done in that lab.

He opened the door at the far end of the room and stepped into a smaller lab beyond, where there were more benches and cabinets like those in the first.

There was also an extensive supply of chemical reagents on glass-doored shelves, as well as floor-to-ceiling metal- doored cabinets that took-up a short end wall.

Unlocked too. By the Scout who talked to Baylor. Who notices things he shouldn't.

Baylor wouldn't look me in the eye after that, so something got said I should know about.

So. A small private office.

It was behind another newly unlocked door, on the left side of the end wall beside the metal cabinets.

And that's where Mitchell started - the neat cramped private room with a drafting table, a large organized desk, and a medium sized metal safe.

It wasn't a combination lock, but one that required a key. And that had been unlocked too, along with the drawers and desk.

Mitchell started with the shallow drawers under the drafting table, pulling out prints and electrical schematics, studying them on the slanting surface.

The prints in the first two or three drawers didn't interest him, but when he got to the fourth, and studied both the prints and schematics, he nodded slowly and said, "Wow!" in a low half-reverent whisper.

He stacked all the plans in that drawer on top of each other, folded them, and put them in his musette bag - then looked through the other drawers, took two more schematics, and moved to the desk and the safe.

He put two lab books he found in the safe into his bag, and four metal reels he found there too, which were wound with coated paper.

Then he moved to the closed metal cabinets out in the smaller lab - where there were more reels, and toilet paper sized rolls of a cellulose-like material he couldn't identify, next to five metal boxes, almost two feet square, with heavy removable lids.

He looked at the boxes carefully, contrasting and comparing, before selecting one.

The team met up again, as arranged, at two hundred hours in the main office by the front door, where Mills and Baylor had been told to report to Mitchell.

Mills had found nothing that seemed particularly significant, but he'd put together a stack of purchase orders detailing materials purchased, as well as suppliers used.

Baylor had brought a cross section of vacuum tubes and electrical parts, in addition to two metal boxes from the smaller room in the assembly plant. Baylor didn't know what they were, except that they were electrical, with dials and controls and small metal shafts projecting from the inside surface.

Mitchell examined the two Baylor brought, selected one, and gave it to Baylor to carry. He told Mills to carry the other, the one Mitchell himself had

brought down from the small upstairs lab.

Then Mitchell walked out to the courtyard, and told Ben they were ready to leave.

The cloud cover had lightened, and they moved quietly, shifting from tree to tree, from shadow to shadow, in half-moonlight, pausing when Ben motioned them to, staying where he told them to stay, as he swept the area in front and to the sides, while Nick guarded their rear.

They had to cross one narrow curving one lane road, cutting southeast-to-northwest through the woods. And as they got near, Ben halted them, and went ahead to scout.

He could hear a vehicle in the distance on his left, on the southeast side, a half a mile away maybe, the noise of it carrying eerily in a quiet cold night.

Car probably.

Nothing big.

No tank.

No personnel carrier.

SS patrol most likely.

German voices.

Laughing.

Talking.

A lot louder than they should.

Ben melted back into the shadows, his rifle in his left hand, butt down on the toe of his boot.

An open car, a Volkswagon panzer wagon, a lot like an American Jeep, rolled in from Ben's left and slid to a stop thirty-five feet in front of him, a few feet to his left.

Damn.

Four SS.

Machine gun mounted on rear.

There was a tire mounted flat on top of the hood, half-hiding the driver and passenger, and there were two men on the flat back, machine gun between them.

The officer in front laughed at one of the soldiers in back, then talked to him out one side of his mouth, a cigar clamped in the other.

The soldier in back handed a liter beer bottle to the officer, climbed down off the car and walked to the side of the road (the other side from where Ben watched) to relieve himself against a tree.

Ben studied each of the SS, listening to the banter, trying to evaluate levels of alcohol and alertness, hoping hard that they'd just drive off - when something cracked behind him.

A tree branch, or a stick on the ground from the sound of it, stepped on by one of the team.

The SS driver opened fire, as the officer catapulted behind him to the far side of the car. Machine gun bullets cut through the woods half-a-second later, ripping trunks and branches, spraying splinters as deadly as shrapnel - as Ben sighted on the German driver and shot him in the chest. He signaled Nick Costello, fifty feet behind him and five feet to the right, to get up beside him fast.

Costello got there, crawling part way, crouching too when he could, while Ben laid covering fire.

Ben told Nick to take care of the squad - and went off to circle the SS.

It was a nasty ten minutes - Ben dodging left through the trees, sprinting across the road seventy feet east, snaking around behind the VW, shooting the two on the machine gun just before Costello shot the officer in the face.

Ben checked pulses, took papers and weapons, then grabbed the key to the panzer wagon.

He sprinted back across the road, and dropped the weapons near Costello. Who was staring blindly at Mills, lying crumpled and dead at his feet, his glasses blown ten feet away. Mitchell wasn't noticing. He was leaning on a tree with a .45 in his hand, his eyes burning on adrenaline. While Willy Baylor lay dying on a slick of mud and broken tree branches, cut and splintered by machine gun fire.

Ben knelt beside him, picking him up, talking to him, cradling his head on his left arm, watching him drain away -until Baylor opened his eyes, and focused on Ben's face.

He tried to say something when he saw Ben, straining, working to get air into ripped lungs, finally managing to whisper, "Mitchell . . . lab . . . alone . . ." He choked, and blood gurgled in his throat. But he gathered himself together again and whispered, "Luger," so quietly Ben could hardly hear it, even with his ear down next to Baylor's face. Baylor kept straining to say something else, his lips working to form the words, his eyes talking to Ben.

But then his face fell against Ben's coat and he died before he could get it out.

Ben held him for another second, then closed Willy Baylor's eyes, and laid him down on the ground.

He took one of Baylor's dog tags off the chain around his neck. And sat on his heels for half a second, before he glanced at Mitchell's back. Then Ben tugged Baylor's coat and shirt up so he could look at his wounds with his flashlight hidden under Baylor's coat.

Luger. Two bullets in the back. Close range.

Closer by a lot than you'd expect.

Ben picked up Baylor's pack, and went to examine Mills.

One bullet to the brain. Luger possibly. Not as close range as Baylor.

Probably closer than across the road.

Ben took one of Mills' dog tags, picked up Mills' pack, then handed the

pack to Mitchell. He grabbed one of the metal boxes, motioned Costello to pick up the other, and started moving-out fast.

They made it back to camp without hitting another patrol, which was more than they'd had a right to expect, after the noise of the firefight.

Ben dropped his musette bag at his own tent, then started over toward Mitchell's with Baylor's pack and metal box. Mitchell was standing outside it, taking off Mills' pack, setting his musette bag on the ground beside it, his Colt .45 strapped around his waist on the outside of his coat.

Mitchell hadn't seen Ben (who'd come up behind him), and when Mitchell leaned over, his coat tightened across his waist and hips, and Ben saw a bulge underneath the cloth. He yanked the coat up without saying a word to Mitchell and pulled a German Luger out of the holster strapped to Mitchell's waist.

Ben stood there, smelling the barrel, even though Mitchell had already spun around and was standing with his fists clenched, staring right at Ben.

Ben was looking at him cold and hard, and Mitchell got right up in his face before he hissed, "What do you think you're doing, soldier?" in a too-quiet belligerent voice.

"Your friends were shot with a Luger, Colonel. Both of them in the back, which was kind of interesting, from closer range than I would've expected, and yours has just been fired."

"I shot both handguns tonight. The SS were firing Lugers too, in case you hadn't noticed. What are you tryin' to say, Sargent?"

"That I'm thinking about it." Ben didn't say anything else. He stood and looked at Mitchell for a minute. And then walked off to headquarters.

He wrote a report that stated the facts without making accusations. He handed in the dog tags. He described the location of the bodies. Then he asked to talk to the Intelligence officer alone.

The officer looked at him, asked his radio operator to leave the tent, and waved Ben into a folding chair.

Ben didn't know the guy, and he sorted what he had to say carefully before he said it. He made no accusations. He confirmed what he'd written in the report, then asked him to find out what he could about Mitchell. Nothing official. Just questions up the line. Like what kind of record he'd had since he'd been in Europe as a TASK officer. Did anything seem fishy? Did an inordinate number of his team members die? Whatever anyone could find out would be greatly appreciated.

The intelligence officer read the report again and asked a couple of questions, before he said, "If it's any consolation, *you* won't be having to deal with him again. You're getting shipped out in less than an hour. You, and eleven other scouts they're bringing in from all over."

Ben thanked him for the help, took the orders the officer had pushed

across the desk, and stepped outside the tent.

He walked a few feet toward the mess tent, sat on his heels in the snow, lit a Camel, and opened his orders.

He walked on to the mess tent and filled his canteens with coffee. Then grabbed two tins of C-Rations and went back to the tent to pack-up.

Chapter Nine

Sunday, January 19th, 1945

Ben Reese had just tied his blanket roll on top of his beat-up musette bag, when a G.I. pulled the tent flap back and said, "Company Commander wants to see you, Sargent."

"Thanks, I'm on my way." Ben slung the bag over his shoulder, grabbed his Springfield 30.06, and shoved his helmet on his head.

Captain Fields was leaning over a folding table signing papers when Ben walked into the CP tent and saluted the top of Field's head.

"Got a Jeep waiting for you, Sargent, to get you to the Replacement Center closer to Monschau. These are your transportation orders for picking up transport there, plus maps and disposition papers that just came through from Regimental. Good luck down there. Sounds like it's heatin' up."

Ben thanked him, as he took the packet. And then went to look for his Jeep.

Five minutes later, he was being driven west through camp, when he saw Ted Mitchell, fifty feet in front of him, watching his driver put two metal boxes into the back of his Jeep.

Ben refused to salute Mitchell. He stared into his face instead, as his own Jeep passed Mitchell's, and flipped his cigarette at Mitchell's feet.

Ben was in the Replacement Center at zero eight hundred hours, snaking his way through the chaos and the crowds, shaking his head at the pink necks and the new boots and the freshly painted helmets, at the squeamish eyes and the nervous looking lips. Ben's uniform had parts of France, Holland, Belgium and Germany ground into it, and he hadn't shaved in a week, or showered in too many more.

But he told himself to back-off anyway, because these kids had been shoved into cattle cars, and packed fast into troop trucks, with no information about where they were going, or what to expect when they got there, and it had to be hitting them hard.

He also asked himself if he'd ever been that green, while he scratched the back of his neck. *They look like ten year old kids. And how long are they gonna last anyway? You put **them** in the woods around Bastogne, with as little training as they get now, and I'd be amazed if -*

"Sargent!"

Ben could hear it all right there in the voice, and he told himself to shut his mouth. He'd been busted down to private twice for saying exactly what he thought, when life-and-death had been at stake. But it made no sense to go through it again for anything picayune.

The voice belonged to a Second Lieutenant (clean and perfectly pressed, insignias bright and shiny) who glared at Ben before he snapped, "You're out of uniform, soldier, and you got yourself unauthorized equipment!"

"Yes-sir. I'm just in from the line, sir, and I'm under special orders now to report to the front down south as fast as I can get there. I'm to pick-up transportation here - "

"Show me your orders."

"Sir." Ben had already started pulling them out of the breast pocket of his battle jacket.

"There's a 4X4 over there on its way to -"

"I think you'll see, sir, if you read on, that I'm instructed to find individual transportation. They're moving a bunch of scouts south fast, and my other orders, under that page, instruct me to - "

"Carry-on, Sargent."

"Thank you, sir." Ben saluted and took back his orders as the Second Lieutenant marched away.

Ben closed his eyes and sighed, before he walked on toward the motor pool.

It took Ben all day and night, plus all the next day and half that second night to get where he was going - to drive down the eastern border of Belgium, down the length of Luxemburg, down past Trier, Germany (which lay east across the Saar River).

They drove past bombed and burned villages, around piles of brick and craters in the earth that were all that was left of too many. Past pastureland too, and mountainous ravines, that made Ben want to stop and stare.

They could've made it faster, if God, or man, had cooperated. It was snow and ice and terrain. It was hospital trucks and supply convoys and tanks blocking the roads.

It did give Ben time to read his maps and disposition papers. And study the Saar valley around the town of Trier, and the large evergreen Saarbrucken Forest that stretched away on the south. Which is not to say he thought he

knew enough. The intelligence was old and sketchy - too spotty and too simple, the way it looked to him.

He still hadn't been told why they were bringing scouts in from all over. It could've been some kind of search-and-destroy, to clean something nasty out before they sent troops in. Or it could've been wide-ranging recon to set-up a big advance.

He also knew it could all have changed by the time he got where he was going. The front as fluid as it was there-and-then, there could easily be good reason to send every scout packing again and scatter them ten other places.

But Ben got to sleep, in the cold and snow, using his blanket as a poncho. And he walked too, to get blood to his toes, when the Jeep was down to a crawl. He drove and let his driver snore through most of the Luxemburg mountains.

And he didn't have reason to shoot a single round. In two-and-a-half days on the road.

But awake, or sleeping, or drifting in between, Ben Reese brooded on Mitchell.

On his hidden Luger, and the ice in his eyes.

On Baylor's first words, and Baylor's last, and the ones he couldn't get out before bullets in the back tore his soul away.

Ben wondered where Mitchell was, and who else he was doing what to. And he tried to come up with something he could do to put pressure on Colonel Mitchell.

He also asked himself why OSS would send the techs in right at that time, saddling scouts and front line troops with even more responsibility. They were making a critical push right then, after a couple of really tough months. *And you'd think the techs could've come in later, farther behind the front line. It's not like there's not enough to do, or plenty of strain to go around.*

Ben was making-up limericks about Mitchell, when the Jeep got to the pick-up spot on the west side of the Saar. It had turned the Twenty-First by then, zero three hundred hours. And there was snow driving into Ben's face out of a pitch black night.

His driver had radioed ahead a couple of hours earlier, and the flat-bottomed square-fronted standard metal assault boat was there waiting to pick Ben up, manned by three guys from a front line unit hunkered down on the German side.

They rowed Ben across without any trouble, then walked him four miles into camp, reported their return at company CP, and found Ben a spot in a foxhole that looked drier than most.

He spent the rest of the night there dreaming about Mitchell, seeing him do unspeakable things, waking up to the clink of a Zippo being lit by another G.I.

Ben had been the third scout to show up, and he'd been debriefed by S2 as soon as he reported in that morning. Intelligence was trying to get a comprehensive picture of the western border of Germany, and they'd be questioning every scout as soon as they made it in.

It had been foggy and badly overcast or snowing hard since the fourteenth, grounding all observation planes, which meant S2 was running blind - blinder, certainly, than they wanted to be inside the German border.

They had *some* firsthand information, but they wanted Ben to scout their eastern perimeter and report back before noon. Another scout would be assigned to him. They'd send him to Ben when he'd been debriefed. And they'd pass on then what they knew about the front.

Ben wanted to ask why they were bringing in so many scouts, but he knew better than to try it then. And he told the two S2 officers he'd be waiting in the mess tent, and went off to find coffee and K-rations.

He'd finished a fair amount of both, when a shiny new Second Lieutenant walked up with a scout Ben would remember forever by not much more than the name Gene, and a vague idea that they would've been friends if they'd ever had time to talk.

Ben asked the kid lieutenant how it looked in front. Meaning, "What's intelligence say is out there?" Which he saw later as a very large mistake made by Ben Reese. He'd been on the line so long himself, he'd expected too much of somebody new.

He'd assumed the kid understood what he meant, and had been sent with info from S2. Only to learn very painfully later that the kid hadn't had a clue - that his answer to Ben of, "Nothing to worry about," should've been probed hard.

He should've asked what S2 said was east of them, and "Who brought the word in, and how old is it now?" Because then he would've talked to intelligence, when he saw the kid didn't know anything.

Instead, he walked out in a khaki uniform in three feet of clean white snow and got trapped between the lines.

It was grey and cold and spitting snow. And Ben had stopped - Springfield in his right hand, .45 under that arm, hatchet hanging on his left hip - listening to a soft white world that muffled and distorted sound.

He froze where he was, absolutely still, half a mile east of American lines behind a tall dark fir, that unlike the trees left standing around Foy, still had lower limbs.

Combat instinct kept him there, every body part on high alert - listening hard, controlling his breathing, holding-back the adrenaline - as he stared around the thick needled boughs down a straight stretch of powdery snow

between two rows of planted trees.

Gene was on Ben's left, twelve or fifteen feet away now, straining to hear the same way Ben was, trying to figure-out what it could've been.

Ben had heard something close-up a second ago, off on his left beyond Gene, and he'd signaled Gene to wait and listen when Gene hadn't stopped on his own.

Ben hadn't heard anything else in that direction, and it might've been something small and furry scurrying away from the sound of men - from him, from Gene, from what was worse rumbling their way in the distance, sounding large and far too ominous deeper inside Germany.

It was rolling land there, higher behind them and higher up ahead. And there was a narrow roadway off on their right that cut east-west between tree rows, but looked to Ben like it curved to the north fifty yards or so in front.

It was lower ground where they stood. Marshy too on the left beyond Gene, where there were swaths of low trees and thick clumps of wild shrub tangled with tall grass and weeds.

Everything marshy was frozen solid and covered by new snow, and there were strangely shaped drifts everywhere they looked, blown along between trees.

Gene shrugged at Ben in a "I'm-not-hearing-anything-near-here-now" kind of way, and looked like he might step out from behind his tree. But Ben waved Gene back and pointed up ahead.

Ben knew what they were by then, even though he couldn't see them - Tiger tanks, more than one, coming from the north on the track through the woods, from the left as Ben looked east through forest, straining to catch the first glimpse.

He was about to motion to Gene to set up his bazooka, when he saw Gene swinging it up, getting ready to set it on his shoulder.

The first Tiger cranked out of a thick stand of trees running left to right as Ben saw it, then turned the curve in the road heading west straight toward them, one tree-row over on Ben's right, fifty yards up ahead.

Ben was trying to see how many were behind it, to decide whether to try to stop it, or melt away fast and scout another day - when a machine gun opened fire sixty feet away on Gene's left.

It was where Ben had heard the soft sound earlier, from the marshy ground covered with bushes and weeds, which he realized now, entirely too late, was a well dug-in machine gun nest manned by at least two men - two very experienced men who dropped Gene with their first burst, with a thirty caliber round to the brain.

Ben crawled across to what was left of him, machine gun bullets spraying the air above him, before and after he grabbed the bazooka and crawled and rolled to the next tree east.

He'd put himself on the safer side of a large fallen tree trunk, but the

machine gun kept him well pinned down while he watched the Tiger roll west - two tree rows south now, and roughly five rows east.

Ben lay on his stomach, wishing he could crouch to fire the bazooka but having to shoulder it prone, watching the gun turret of the Tiger swivel toward him, holding his breath as he aimed the bazooka at the seam between the turret and the tank.

Ben had just watched the Tiger blow apart, when a second tank turned the corner in the road, its front machine gunner starting to strafe him, while the machine gun behind Ben whittled away at the log.

Something hit the watch on Ben's left wrist (his dad's watch from the First War) without doing damage to him. Though nine rounds did right after that, slamming into him in rapid succession - some from the gunner on the Tiger Tank, some from the nest behind him.

Ben lay on a snow drift the rest of that day, packing snow in his wounds to slow the blood flow, while entirely too many Tigers rolled west through the Saarbrucken Forest, and American guns answered back.

The machine gun nest was silenced fairly soon by something lobbed from the American lines, but Ben was long past knowing or caring what had taken it out. He was down and damaged in the middle of a firefight. A sitting duck for friendly fire as much as enemy attack.

He never did have a clear idea of what it was that fought that day, or how broad the front was sweeping south beyond him. The German troops were new to the area, that much he understood - a tank unit (or regiment, or division) G2 knew nothing about. There was American artillery, obviously, 75s probably. And a whole lot more than that that Ben couldn't see, or wasn't conscious enough to notice, that beat back the tanks and stopped their attempt to break through.

Ben never knew how long he lay there. Sometimes he thought it must've been three hours, sometimes he thought it was more like five or six, while he packed snow into all those holes and watched himself die.

He had died. He'd seen it happen. He'd felt it happen in a way he couldn't have described. He looked down, from somewhere up above himself, and saw his own body, twisted and torn, lying dead on blood soaked snow - and knew somehow, in the next instant, that he was being sent back by someone with thoughts and intentions and purposes. Larger thoughts, and deeper, than any in the minds of men.

Ben wouldn't have said that he'd heard a voice, but the message got communicated. There was something more for him to do, something that was still required. *That* came down to him loud and clear. He was being given more time, and there was conscious purpose in that, which he had to choose to take-up.

It hung there in front of him - the chance to do good, or the chance to do

ill with the time that lay before him. And his whole soul and his battered body and the mind that couldn't run anything right then ached to be able to help - to heal harm and stop the hurt whatever way he could. To stop Ted Mitchell, and people like him, from shattering those around them.

Then he was back, lying on a cold white drift, licking flakes of snow off his lips, while he tried to move his right leg.

Ben thought he heard someone call to him, sometime in the afternoon, the medic behind the lines maybe, saying, "Hold-on, buddy, hold-on, we'll get you out of this soon!" - but hours went by before anyone could.

He passed-out and swam back to the surface off-and-on all afternoon, while the air exploded around him, as both sides threw what they had across him, as trees shattered in brain-splitting shrieks, as the world slid from grey to black (bitter and colder than ice), without him being hit again, which he knew made no good rational sense with the odds so stacked against it.

His teeth chattered. His feet felt frostbitten. He couldn't begin to raise his head long before the firefight ended. He wondered once about the sound he'd heard, coming from the machine gun nest, if it had been the cocking mechanism being carefully set in place.

A medic did come, when the shells had almost stopped. He shoved a Syrette of morphine in Ben's thigh and tied a strip of gauze around his waist to tell the world he was still alive and needed medical transport.

January 21st, 1945

Transport was what saved Ben. Medics and GI's he didn't know at all taking him out on a litter lashed on the hood of a Jeep. Driving him fast across a big empty field up to an old Piper Cub. Strapping his stretcher onto the outside, under the battered undercarriage.

Ben tried to laugh, when he realized what they were doing. But a medic did something to him, gave him another hit of morphine probably, and stepped away from the plane.

Taxiing across a rutted field made his bones grind in ways he couldn't have described, and the lift-off too, staying under the ack-ack fire, so cold his ribs seemed to crack inside him, under skin that felt like it had grown a sheet of ice.

The landing knocked him out, after he'd heard himself screaming, and couldn't make himself stop.

He never remembered anything after that till he felt a needle hit his arm, and heard a woman's voice close up against his cheek. "Have they given you penicillin, soldier?"

“Me? . . . I don’t know . . .”

“I’ll inject a full dose now, and you remember if anybody asks. There’s a tourniquet below your left shoulder. Be careful you don’t bump it, okay? You’re getting a blood transfusion in your right arm too, so you gotta keep it real still.”

She floated away somewhere, more or less the way he did, into watery dreams and shivering half-light - before he realized, from bits and pieces that came and went without warning, that he was lying on a litter, swaying with the clatter of a lurching train, in nothing but a hospital gown and socks that weren’t his.

That got what there was of his attention - because everything that kept him alive was gone.

His wires and gadgets, that he’d kept in his pockets. His Olympic rifle and his Bowie knife. His old Colt and the hatchet his dad made with the big heavy pick.

They’d stripped him naked. And left him defenseless.

And taken his souvenirs. Jackboots. Gloves. The Luger in his musette bag. The German wristwatch that had been a work of art, pried off an SS Colonel. Somebody else was using them now, or planning to make a few bucks off them.

Ben understood that they’d had to strip him. That they had to be able to work on his wounds. But it felt like part of what made him who he was had been ripped-out right through his skin.

Both times he’d been wounded before, they’d kept his equipment with him when they’d patched him up, and sent him back to the line.

So this time they must know he wasn’t going back.

And what that meant began to work its way in.

He’d never have to worry again about what was hiding in a hedgerow. Or waiting behind a half-closed door. Or watching him up the road.

He’d never take-on another Tiger Tank. Or an 88. Or a sniper hidden in a burned-out town. No more, ever again. No more of anything getting zeroed-in on him.

No more mines. No machine gun nests. No lice. No frostbite. No night-after-night-after-night without sleep.

He’d never scout another command post and slaughter the men inside. Or lay his life on a sharp slippery line on somebody’s lousy intelligence.

He’d never walk-up on another Malmedy, and be the one to find the twisted bodies. The hundreds of G.I. POWs, machine gunned by an SS unit, left to rot under nothing but a dusting of dirt.

Ben tried to smile, while he held his breath, a shallow breath that still hurt - letting it out again very slowly, feeling himself sink deeper into canvas, before he closed his eyes.

He saw six stretchers on both sides of the car, when he opened them the

next time. And one nurse making the rounds of men silent and screaming.

Some died, and got carried out, when the train stopped at the stations. Other litters got squeezed in. New nurses checked wounds and I.V.s, while Ben wove in-and-out.

The door to the car slammed shut behind him, shaking him awake with a start, as another stretcher was carried through - Ted Mitchell staring at Ben as his litter was carried past.

"Stop him!" Ben struggled to sit up, yelling, "He murdered his own men!" A nurse pushed him down again, and when he could look around her, he saw it wasn't Mitchell.

He tried to tell the soldier he was sorry, that he'd thought he was someone else, before he closed his eyes once more and dreamt something worse about Mitchell, something weirder and gorier he couldn't remember when he woke.

He never knew when he got to Paris. It was dark, he could see that. And he remembered a nurse telling him he was going to the biggest American hospital there (which he learned later was called Sainte Coeur).

He couldn't have said when it was they deloused him. Before they took him to surgery he thought, some time in the night. But he couldn't be sure of that anymore than anything else.

They stitched his left arm, starting with the tip of his index finger, sewing up to, and around, his shoulder - and then they put the arm in a cast (after they'd cleaned out the dirt and debris and tried to do something useful with what was left of the bones).

Thirty caliber rounds slam through bone and beef like butter, especially at the range they'd hit Ben, so there weren't bullets left to dig out, just shreds of bone and cloth.

They tried to clean his internal parts (his stomach and gut and left lung) and sew them together so they'd stay, before they stitched the outside holes - and put him to bed in a big packed ward with every imaginable wound.

When he'd stopped retching from the ether (and how long that took, that and all the surgery, he never had any idea), he found a wheelchair waiting beside his bed, and no nurse in the room.

He'd been dreaming about Mitchell, watching him slit Gene's throat this time, without being able to get to Gene to help. And then he woke, and listened hard, to all the misery in the room.

Ben told himself to think about something else, and started with the men by Trier who hadn't known him from a hole in the wall, but did everything that could've been done to help him stay alive. He compared that to Mitchell murdering the men he led - and that made Ben even more incensed.

He told himself to think about something good, like Jessie, and going

home, and starting school at I.U. again - when it hit him suddenly that he was in Paris with free time on his hands.

His father had been in Paris during the First World War, and he'd told Ben stories that made him think it was time he saw it too. He stared at the wheelchair, and threw back his covers, and took a look at his legs.

The right didn't look too bad (one flesh wound, stitched together). The left was heavily bandaged (lower leg *and* upper), with blood seeping through. That led him to roll on his right side and push himself to sit up, which turned out to be intensely painful, because of the crater in his stomach.

He had to sit there and hold on to the bed for a minute.

But he was in the wheelchair five minutes later, wheeling himself down a long hall using his right hand and foot.

The Champs Elysees, that was where he was going, then on to the Louvre another day when he wasn't feeling so queasy.

He'd almost gotten to the hospital's front door when a nurse came flying around a corner. She turned him around and pushed him back toward his ward, asking exactly what First Sargent Reese thought he might be doing.

"Heading toward the Champs Elysees."

"How old are you, soldier?"

"What's today?"

"January 23rd."

"I'll be twenty-two next week. Why do you want to know?"

"You were waking-up from the ether talking about taking kids into combat, and I figured you had to be older than you looked." She smiled when she said it. And then went on to point out that Ben was at least old enough to notice that he was all but naked, which might disturb the Parisian population. "Winter's still with us too, you know, and wheelchair travel could be risky."

He was back in bed two minutes later, without his hospital gown this time, to discourage further attempts at departure - the wheelchair having been swept away to an undisclosed destination.

He slept for awhile, then sipped something fizzy, before he looked at the room.

There was everything in that ward - shell and shrapnel mutilations, single and multiple limb amputations, burn cases among the worst (tankers and pilots usually, whose faces and body parts had been seared off), men whose colons had impacted horribly, which nurses had to scrape out.

The G.I. in the bed on Ben's right was one of those, and when Ben's neurosurgeon, Dr. Willard Jones, wheeled Ben off to an examination room, Ben was mildly ashamed of himself, but profoundly glad to get out.

He wasn't without difficulties himself. His left leg was badly shot up. There was a serious wound in his abdomen, and another somewhat less severe on the upper left side of his back. He couldn't move his left arm, and had no

feeling in it anywhere below the top of his shoulder.

Several depressing facts about bone grafts and nerve damage were presented by Dr. Jones, before he started his summing up. "I still don't know if I can save your arm, or how much use it'll be if I do. Your left leg should respond pretty well, since the slugs didn't shatter the bone. Your abdominal wound is a concern, as I'm sure you know from the ones you saw in combat, and the wound on your back is nothing to take lightly. You've got a substantial amount of surgery and nerve stimulation ahead, especially on your arm, and most of it will be experimental. So what that means is it's too soon to call. It could've been a lot worse, though, as I'm sure you already know."

He asked Ben about his interests, and what he'd done in the war, while he probed the nerves in two parts of Ben's arm - one by the shoulder above the cast, another below the elbow through a hole they'd left for that purpose.

Jones stared at Ben for half a minute without saying a word. Then asked the last question Ben expected. "How much do you weigh?"

"I don't know. One-seventy-two at the end of Basic."

"You're a good bit thinner than that now, for being six feet tall."

Dr. Jones and a tiny nurse (who looked like she was twelve years old) hoisted Ben up on a big metal scale and held him there till he was balanced.

"A hundred and forty-nine, including the plaster cast. That's good, Sargent. That means you get to go home."

"What?"

"I want you back in the States right away. A medical flight's leaving tonight, and I can add a hundred and fifty pounds, but not an ounce more. That okay with you?"

Ben Reese swallowed as he stared at Dr. Jones. Something funny was happening in his throat, and he nodded at Jones instead of trying to talk.