"Not hardly," he drawled. "The Pentagon no doubt will be enough of a snow job, as our daughter the sailor would say." Despite his words, his wife knew he was relishing this lame-duck session of Congress, inasmuch as he was preeminently of the opposite species. The war having spawned so many military bases in the western states, the region at last was in line to seat a formidable old cuss of its own in the main chair of the committee that held the purse-strings in such matters, now that the venerable chairman had retired to his peach farm. With his whopping re-election, the Senator fit the bill and he intended to fill it. His plateside reading these mornings was a tome titled *Bureaucracies and Their Foibles*.

Her busy day of holiday chores on her mind with Christmas coming fast, his wife somewhat absently waited for him to pull out his dollar watch, his signal of leaving for the Capitol. Today he made a show of consulting its Roman numerals, but a governing instinct of a murkier sort had taken hold of him as it sometimes did. "First thing, I need to futz around in the mail room a little." His wife made a face as he left the table; she didn't like *futz*.

Nor the mail room, for that matter. She never set foot into the alcove library where he felt most at home in the otherwise womanized house. And the ~~Negro~~ colored maid was not let in the room, not since the time she tidied by stacking everything together. With the satisfaction of familiarity the Senator again gazed around at the musty bookshelves, the favorite framed *Chicago Tribune* political cartoon showing him as a bowlegged wrangler roping a runaway bull with the head and face of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and last and most comforting of

all, the outmoded military trestle tables waiting with seven batches of newspapers, eight to a pile. The weeklies from all fifty-six Montana counties, right here in the Potomac swampland ready for his perusal whenever the spirit moved him. Of all the senatorial perquisites there were, this one especially tickled him. He knew his staff drew straws to see which of them, at the dawn of each week, would have to take a taxi down from the Hill with the bulging mailbag of newspapers and lay them out in prescribed order, and the fact that they despised the chore only made him snort to himself in amusement. Montana was big as hell and just as tricky to represent, and he long since had figured out that having the local view of things fetched into this room for him beat trying to chase down the moods of constituents across a six-hundred-mile swath of earth.

Actually, there was more to it than that. In dismal bunkhouses and drafty line cabins when the century and he were unconquerably young, this gaunt old bone-sprung prairie Caesar had read his way up in the world via weekly compilations of community happenings just such as these; somehow even then he savvied more than was on the page, and the Faustian skills of small-town editors--recording angel one paragraph, gossipmonger the next--he had been careful to reckon with ever since. If nothing else, it appealed to him as cheap insurance for a man in his position. He could see no sign in the insane modern world that the pen was mightier than the sword, but it was damn sure stronger than most campaign speeches.

As he worked through this day's stack of newsprint about livestock prices and the latest run of bad weather, he checked his watch again. The new power that

was coming to him with the gavel of the committee needed judicious exercise in the halls of the Senate and he had to allow time for that. He at last was in a position to do something about alphabet-soup wartime projects that did not point straight to victory and he was not going to waste--

The bold line of type caught his eye as he was paging through the *Gros Ventre Gleaner.*

THOSE WHO GAVE ALL.

At these words something occurred, like a catch of breath but much deeper, in the hardened Senator. He blinked and looked again. He had not seen that heading since World War One. His kid brother had been one of those listed then, mortally wounded in a barrage at Château-Thierry in 1918.

Staring, he bent closer over the column of names of young ones grown to military age in the quarter-century since.

Adamic, Stefan, killed in action in New Guinea.

Baker, Raymond, died in military hospital of wounds suffered in the Anzio invasion.

Cooper, Samuel, sailor on the USS Yorktown, missing in action.

Copenhaver, Theodore, killed in plane crash during training at Sweetwater, Texas.

Crosby, Vern, killed in action at Leyte...

With a chill he ran his finger on down and down the alphabe

Godamighty, that many? In one county? A county--and an editor--I

knew like the back of his hand. In their span of political alliances o

Crosby, Vern, killed in action at Leyte...

With a chill he ran his finger on down and down the alphabet of death.

Godamighty, that many? In one county? A county--and an editor--he thought he knew like the back of his hand. In their span of political alliances of convenience

Is this okay as Godamighty? Or should it be Godalmighty? (453)

he considered Bill Reinking a bit soft on Roosevelt, but rock-solid other than that. The list broke at the bottom of the newspaper column, and started anew at top of the next.

McCaskill, Alex, killed in strafing attack in Tunisia.

Peterson, Morton, died as prisoner-of-war in Bataan death march.

Petrie, Laura Ann, Army nurse, killed by artillery barrage behind the lines at the battle for Avranches.

Quigg, James, shot down over Germany, missing in action.

Rennie, Victor, died in England during a bombing raid.

He felt as if he was reading something direly biblical. Old family names of the Two Medicine country, the soul of the state. Heavy loss in more ways than one, and the *Gleaner* editor must have been driven to do this by its unavoidable weight.

The Senator rubbed his long jaw and rapidly riffled through the rest of the weeklies in that stack. The Choteau *Acantha* also listed its county's war dead, as did the Lewistown *Argus,* the Sidney *Herald,* the Dillon *Herald-Examiner.* He hesitated, then started going through the next batch of newspapers from the eastern part of the state. Lists of the war dead showed up in several of the papers from there too, so whatever Bill Reinking had caught was still breaking out elsewhere.

Something else, too. Like father, like son. The Senator went back and counted. Of the sixteen weeklies in the two batches, nearly all had run Ben

Reinking's story on the last flight of the Supreme Team's ninth man, Lieutenant Jacob Eisman.

The Senator stalked out to the telephone on the hallway stand and dialed as if incising the numbers.

"Mullen, get me the goddamn figures on how many Montana soldiers have been killed in this war. And then compared to the other states."

SB

As the general finished up and presented the Senator's letter to Cass, his aide stood ready with the bright-colored service ribbons for her to pin on the chests of her pilots. She hoped her hands would be steady enough; she set her mind to making them steady enough. The women mechanics on the wings of all the planes stood watching now. Someone started it by clanging one wrench against another, and then the others began banging their tools, the thunderous metallic applause filling the East Base hangar and rolling out to the glistening buttes.

SB

The hill, white and pyramidal and alone of its kind in the spongy Belgian countryside ahead, sent a chill through Ben as the jeep wheeled through the village of Waterloo to the actual battlefield. When he hastily checked, Maurice's guidebook described the area as gentle farmland when the armies of Europe massed there on a midsummer day in 1815, and the out-of-place hill, so artificially perfect in contour, as a mound of earth built to honor one of Wellington's Dutch generals, the Prince of Orange, wounded in the battle but of the kind he could

heroically write home about that night. Ben already was jotting--*the Butte du Lion, name piled on it as sod was heaped in homage to a royal wound*--when Maurice proposed as if on cue: "What do you say we take the high ground, Ben? If glory does not await us there, luncheon does."

From up there, the winter rumple of the land for a few miles around was hard to read as history written in blood. Not much had been made of the battlefield. A modest museum across the road from the mound, not yet back in business since the Germans pulled out. A plaque there on the hilltop diagramming the battle, and a colossal cast-iron lion on a pedestal, supposedly emblematic of the Prince's courage, gazing implacably over the sleeping landscape. Otherwise, the mildly rolling plain of Waterloo looked unaltered since the sea gave it to the land. Yet down at the bottom of the manufactured hill lay the otherwise insignificant low ridge, the Duke of Wellington's high ground, where Napoleon's legions battered themselves to death in charge after charge. Ben measured off a mile with his eye, then another, then a third; incongruous as it seemed, that bit of countryside scarcely big enough to pasture a restless band of sheep had held the army of France, Britain's and armies of other nations scared stiff of Napoleon remaking the map of Europe, and thirty thousand cavalry horses. The only surly aspect at the moment was the weather, low-rolling clouds starting to spit snowflakes, and the forest near Waterloo village that had stood out dark against the snow when they arrived now was gowned in fog. Maurice had brought a thermos of hot drink--it was actually identifiable as tea--and they munched twists of bully beef and squares of chocolate along with it as they deciphered the battle

site from the *Trekker's* guide. Then Ben began to write in the notepad and Maurice circled the tight top of the mound clicking photographs to send home to New Zealand.

When the chill began to get to both of them, Maurice at the other end of the lion's parapet sent Ben a look that politely inquired whether he about had enough for his TPWP piece. He did. The notepad held nugget phrases he could refine in the typewriter tonight. Belgium as the unwilling crossroads marched over by contending armies so many times, Waterloo as the sole crossroads in Belgium that counted on a reddened day four generations of soldiers ago. A high-ranking officer on Wellington's general staff who had a mania for resorting to rockets, buzz bombs of the day, although he would have to somehow get that across between the lines. The nearly permanent battlefield dateline, *Somewhere in Europe*, in 1815 here amid fields of Belgian corn and rye, at the moment in the forest and genuine uplands of the Ardennes on the border of Germany. That was part of the hell of war, you could so readily trace it from the past to now in an undiminished bloodline.

"I've had enough if you have," he called across the mound top to Maurice and they descended the steps of the hill to begin the journey back to Antwerp.

No sooner were they on the road along the foggy forest than the jeep popped around a corner near where a telephone line crossed and on the roadside just ahead were three American G.I.s, surprise all over them, arrayed at the closest

pole. The pair in pole-climbing gear were about halfway up while the third one, carrying a rifle, stood guard.

"Minions of your Alexander Graham Bell at Waterloo," Maurice remarked, "what next?" He and Ben saw the guard call up to the others, then wave urgently for the jeep to stop.

As they pulled to a halt, the G.I. on guard stepped in close to the jeep and saluted. His winterweight field jacket and olive drab pants showing the grime of duty, his tone carried customary soldierly complaint. "Sure glad to see you, officers, isn't this weather crappy? They"--the universal infantryman's code for those in charge--"dropped us here to fix the line. Can you give us a lift, to catch up with the other fellows?"

"Willingly," said Maurice, elegantly courteous beyond what the soldier seemed to have expected. Ben looked at the reddened hands clutching the rifle. He chipped in some down-to-earth sympathy over standing around in the snow guarding Signal Corps handymen. "They've got you riding shotgun on the spool crew, have they. That can't be fun. Who's going to be around here except tourists like us?"

The soldier, no youngster, glanced around nervously. "Sir, looking out for infiltrators. Strict instructions, sir."

Maurice lifted an eyebrow skeptically. "This far from the front? That would be ambitious of the Huns." Overhead, Ben could see the pair of linemen feverishly squirreling into work position at the top of the pole, apparently eager for the jeep ride. The one leaning back in his climbing belt at the top said

something to the lower one, who fumbled in the tool bag at his waist to hand up a set of wire pliers. It occurred to Ben, under the circumstances, to make conversation with the soldier at the side of the jeep. "What did you think of the Army-Navy game?"

"Army beat them good, hah?" the G.I. responded appreciatively. "Twenty-three to seven, right, sir?"

"Navy never stood a chance against guys who can run the ball like Pilchard and Travis," Ben offered his analysis. Drumming his fingers on the steering wheel during this football talk, Maurice looked over at him with abstract curiosity. Ben breezed on, "I didn't get to hear the game, so I missed out on the details--who got the touchdowns?"

The soldier worked at remembering. "Pilchard and Travis had one each, I think, sir."

Ben reached casually to his side and pulled out the .45 pistol. "It's Blanchard and Davis, *kamerad*." Then shot the man in the shoulder before he could yank the rifle up into action.

With that one crying out in German as he writhed on the ground, Ben for good measure fired a couple of shots up at the phone-line saboteurs. One hurled the tool bag and hit the hood of the jeep as Maurice jammed into reverse, while the other sought the skinny shelter of the pole as he tried to pull a pistol from the unfamiliar American holster with a flap. The jeep careening backward was well out of range down the road, when Maurice swung it around and tromped on the accelerator.

As the jeep roared its way back to the main road, they could already see a confusion of military traffic ahead, armored vehicles streaming toward the Ardennes front and ambulances forcing through in the opposite direction. It was mid-December, and the moving wall of oblivion that Allied troops would call the Battle of the Bulge was set into motion.

21

(TPWP priority dispatch--Antwerp--byline Reinking)

German armored columns pierced the Allied lines in a surprise counterattack today along the Ardennes front. The German offensive, spearheaded by ~~Panzer~~ tanks, took advantage of a ghostly infiltration by English-speaking Germans in U.S. Army uniforms who cut phone lines and changed road signs, sowing confusion behind the lines from the Ardennes forest to Antwerp.

Royal Air Force Lieutenant Maurice Overby and I witnessed this dark art of sabotage at a place haunted with history's bloody joust of armies, the battlefield of Waterloo. Our jeep was hailed by a rifle-carrying soldier, his G.I. uniform appropriately grimy and a footslogger's usual complaints ready on his lips....

Apprehensively, Ben watched as Maurice read the piece, as if chewing every word and letting it digest. The wire clerk, bored, took off his glasses, polished them, held them up to the light, polished them some more.

Finally Maurice issued with a polite but firm frown: "Sorry, Ben, but this simply cannot be let pass."

No, no, goddamn it, Maurice, oh please. My biggest story of the war and you're going to sit on it. Why couldn't you tell me that before I busted my butt writing it? Anguished words building in him for what he knew would be a futile protest, he was stopped by the censorious finger significantly tapping the first sheet of copy paper.

"Flattering as it would be to have my name entered in posterity in this fashion," Maurice was holding forth, "you must strike it. Regulations." He handed Ben the full set of pages.

"That's it? That's all?"

"Right." Unmoving as a crate, Maurice stood watching Ben's pencil slash out his name and dab in substitute wording. He nodded in satisfaction and walked off as Ben thrust the pages to the waiting wire clerk.

(New lede--byline Reinking)

Allied forces are trying to regroup along a shattered Ardennes front, where German tank columns shadowed by Wehrmacht foot soldiers in snow-colored camouflage uniforms have advanced nearly a quarter of the way to Antwerp. The surprise breakout, bulging 25 miles into Allied lines, was aided by German infiltrators who snarled communication lines before the armored attack. (Pick up previous piece as follows.)

A Royal Air Force officer and I witnessed this dark art of sabotage at a place haunted with history's bloody joust of armies, the battlefield of Waterloo....

As transmissions of combat reports filtered in to the wildly clattering wire room, Ben pieced together the picture and updated his story time and again. He eyed Maurice warily each time he handed him a new first page, but invariably it was handed back with that benign nod.

All that night and into next day--Ben had lost track of time--as the German attack careened through surprised Allied forces, the only interruption to his flow of story was the periodic message from Tepee Weepy: GREAT STUFF, KEEP SENDING.

(6th new lede--byline Reinking)

The bulge in the line of fierce fighting along the Ardennes front has grown hour by hour, as Allied forces fall back from the brunt of the desperate German counterattack. Smoke arose outside abandoned command posts as Christmas mail not yet distributed to American troops was burned to keep it from falling into German hands. Communications among Allied forces still suffer from the snipped phone lines and misdirected road signs inflicted by infiltrators. (Pick up previous piece as follows.)

A Royal Air Force officer and I witnessed this dark art of sabotage...

"That's it, I must tell you, Ben." Maurice was just back from the command bunker. "HQ has had orders from Supreme Headquarters to halt all news reports except official releases. Which is to say, no news."

"Take a break," Ben blearily told the slumped-over wire clerk and saw him off to the beverage urn. He turned around to Maurice, rubbing his eyes and trying to work the kink out of his neck from all the hours bent over teletype machines. "Just between you and me and the red pencil that didn't come out of your pocket, why did they let me get away with what I sent?"

"Interesting situation," Maurice mused over it as if it were a problem in chess. "Our general was quite firm about making it known to the world this German breakthrough is a nasty business for us. What is the American term, to set up a howl?" His tone turned solemn. "All the combat reports indicate the bulge, so-called, is aimed directly here, to retake Antwerp. Shut down the port, cut our forces in two at the same time," he made a sweeping gesture to illustrate the extent of the strategy, "it makes quite good sense from the Hun point of view, doesn't it. Therefore HQ here thought wise to put the word out--your words, actually--before Supreme Headquarters clamped down on the embarrassing news that the Germans caught them with their pants very much down."

Practically dead on his feet, Ben moved off from the TPWP teletype, clapping Maurice on the shoulder as he passed. "Tepee Weepy and me, always glad to be of service."

Moxie was taking the Battle of the Bulge personally. Wound tight, he sat on the edge of his bunk as if about to spring. "Those sneaky kraut SOBs. They're going for broke." It was the best military analysis Ben had heard yet. "Goddamn it, Reinking, are we still going to get out of here tomorrow?"

Propped in the doorway, Ben answered with each sentence taking effort. "If the USO bunch gets here, I don't see why not. The brass will have to get them back out, and they can squeeze us onto the plane. Maurice keeps checking, the flying looks OK--the Luftwaffe isn't so much in this, it's more a hell of a ground attack." He looked at the man rooted to the bunk and before he knew it heard himself saying what he was thinking: "You know, Mox, there's no law that you couldn't get off your duff and see what you can find out--"

"I am. I have." Moxie shifted to one side on his perch, then right back. "I was about to tell you. I hunted up our ack-ack intelligence officer, we go back a long ways together. They figure when Supreme Headquarters gets its head out of its butt, they'll be able to stop the Germans about halfway here. Ten days or two weeks. It's going to get worse before it gets better." He gnawed his mouth at the next news. "Ben? They're pulling my crews and some of the others to throw them into it as anti-tank outfits. Those ninety-millimeters can knock the turret off a Tiger tank. But it's front-line fighting, they could get overrun awful damn easy the way the Germans are rolling."

"Then aren't you lucky you're here and not there." Ben teetered away from the doorframe. "I need chow and sleep. Hold the fort, Captain Stamper."

He was forking down scrambled powdered eggs and sausages that tasted like sawdust when the wire clerk came looking for him.

"Sir, the Hollywood major wants to see you."

"The which?"

"The rec officer. He's big on USO shows and the bigger the movie star"--the clerk's glasses glinted as he cupped his hands in front of his chest to indicate the category of big--"the better he likes it."

Food and fork forgotten, Ben tried to see past the opaque gaze of the clerk. Was this the ticket home? Or the next thing the war had up its sleeve? "Does that mean the USO troupe is here? On the ground?"

"Yes, sir. Landed from Prestwick about an hour ago."

Now Ben was halfway up out of his chair. "Where do I find this major?"

Giving him a *where else?* look, the clerk answered: "In the Wonder Bar, sir."

The bunker corridor near the Officers Club looked like a backstage that had dropped into a theater basement. The black pebbled leatherette cases of musical instruments were arrayed along the concrete base of the wall. People not in military olive drab, standing out like peacocks, bustled in and out of rooms. Passing one, Ben glimpsed the movie actress famous for choosing the shyest fuzz-cheeked soldier in the audience for the honor of sprinkling delousing powder down her back. Elsewhere, several band members were in a card game with the comedian whose jokes fed off how skinny he was. Picking his way in through the

clutter of the USO troupe, Ben found the Wonder Bar all but unrecognizable--a temporary stage across one end and tables and elbow room banished to make space for wall-to-wall rows of folding chairs. Trying to tally it all, he felt cocooned in a weird mix of silly dream and nightmare. Not a hundred miles away soldiers were dying in droves in the German surprise attack, and in here was show business as usual, setting up to manufacture songs, patter, and jokes. Half-heartedly he tried a pep talk on himself: just get through this travesty of Antwerp's war, the Duke of Wellington had danced in Brussels a few nights before Waterloo, hadn't he? Morale of the troops, what antics are committed in thy name.

"Good, good, you're here. Ted has been wanting to see you." The major who had materialized and was patting him on the upper arm had chalky eyebrows and the hatchet face of a deacon. Amid the semi-chaos of entertainment being set up he was looking as pleased as could be. "I'll take you over and introduce you."

"That's okay, sir. We've met. Long ago."

Ben steeled himself and headed toward the familiar snapbrim hat in the small huddle near the stage steps. Bareheaded bored newsreel technicians stood on either side of Loudon. The taller one, evidently a cameraman, was saying reluctantly: "All right, we can shoot that if we have to. What's the name of the damn place again, the Roxy?"

"Where do you think you are, back in palookaville?" Even in what passed for conversation, Loudon's pace of talk any more was the fastest an ear could keep up with. "It's the Rex, you're in a country with a king, get it? So what I want is--" He caught sight of ginger hair and an impassive longitudinal face. "Ben Reinking!

Captain Reinking. Captain on the gridiron, captain in the service of his country." The idea seemed to entertain Loudon. "What a piece of luck you're here to be on the show with Moxie, two heroes for the price of one." He waved off the newsreel crew. "You know the drill, boys. See you when you get back. Ben, you still look like you're in great shape. Bet you could still run down one of Moxie's passes. Hey, I wonder if--"

"Ted, no funny stuff with a football for the show. We're in a goddamn war zone and Moxie and I both are on our last legs and--"

"Sure, sure. Anyway, how's it feel to make All-American? Catches you up with Eisman." Loudon's flat inexpressive face did not match the voice. "Hell of a thing with him and Danzer, isn't it--beyond dead, turned into part of the atmosphere." It took great effort, but Ben did not respond to that. "You guys as a team were something else," Loudon was going on, exuding sincerity. He did a slight jerking motion of his head to one side as if making a check mark with his chin. "Something else."

Ben jammed his fists in his pockets to hide their readiness. "Look, Loud--Ted, how about showing me what pony trick you want me to do on the broadcast, so I can go get some rest."

"Sam?" Loudon yelled across the room to the show director. "Doing a walkthrough with my guest star. Come on up, Ben." Loudon trotted up the makeshift stairs. The singing-and-dancing sister act was rehearsing on the stage, in gowns that looked spun from cotton candy. "Excuse us, ladies," Loudon pushed past with Ben following, "All-American coming through." At the far end of the

stage was a folding mockup of a stadium broadcasting booth, pennants painted on and *The Loudon Lowdown* lettered large amid those. Rapidly the sportscaster rehearsed Ben in coming onstage when the 'Supreme Team' cue was given and slipping into a seat behind the microphone in the fake booth. "It's tight for three," ~~Loudon~~ he jabbed a thumb at the empty seat on the other side, "but we'll make it work. Moxie'll be along later, he's getting dressed up. Hey, wasn't that tough about Bruno's team not making the Rose Bowl? One lousy touchdown short in the Stanford game."

"Tough."

"Anyway," ~~he~~ Loudon thrust a copy of the script at Ben, "look over my questions so there're no surprises. Keep your answers short. Hell, I don't need to tell you the ropes--you're a star in your own right." The checkmark with the chin again. "That Guam broadcast. Whooh."

Ben as if by instinct had zeroed in on the nub of the script. *"The unbeaten Treasure State Golden Eagles of 1941 were a football team without precedent, and tonight I wish to honor them in a way befitting that. That gallant eleven, with every starting player enlisting in the service of our country after Pearl Harbor, went on to another peerless record, in courage. Nine of those football heroes gave their lives in this war, and in honor of how they gave their all, tonight I am naming that 'Supreme Team' who so bravely traded football uniforms for military uniforms my All-American team for this year. We are lucky to have with us tonight the two surviving heroes..."* Ben's temples throbbed. *You never spare the*

schmalz, do you, Loudon. Script gripped in hand, he rose to get away from the man.

Loudon looked up at him expectantly. "The show's at midnight, remember, we have to do it that late to hit prime time back home. You're going to catch some rest, you said. Got an alarm clock?"

"In my pocket."

Ben left the Wonder Bar with Loudon staring after him in puzzlement.

He flopped down on his bunk with the cocotte clock set to go off in half an hour. He knew better than to drop deep asleep for an extended time, he would still be groggy when it was the time for the show. He had lived with the clock of war for so long, with its unending hours and split-second dangers, that rationing his time for one last night was worth everything. Tomorrow a plane homeward out of the war. In some other tomorrow, a script made into a movie that would reveal Loudon and Bruno for what they were. His tired mind traversed from the one thought to the other, forth and back, as Maurice would have said. He dozed off that way.

When the cocotte clock dinged, he cracked his eyes barely a slit and closed them again against the corridor lighting pouring through the doorway. It was the most welcome indulgence in days just to lie there with the faint rosy nothingness behind the eylids. The nothingness dimmed for a moment.

He opened his eyes, unsure.

Then the tossed-off words came back. *"Moxie'll be along later, he's getting dressed up."* Moxie hated dressing up. He had barely managed it for Purcell's funeral. His deliberately careless fashion was that of an unmade bed.

Ben jerked upright on the bunk, put his shoes on in a hurry and went out into the bunker corridor. He asked the officer next door: "Did the lights blink just now?"

"Same like always," came the reply in a used-to-it voice. "The buzz bomb dimmer switch."

He hurried down the corridor to Moxie's room. Empty. *Okay, he must be hanging around the Wonder Bar watching them set things up, is all. Showing Inez the glamorous life.* He couldn't quite convince himself. Moxie was not the kind to sit in a corner watching other people be in charge.

This time he stuck his head in the room across the hall, the senior enlisted men's side. A grizzled gunnery sergeant at the wall niche desk writing a letter home looked around in surprise and started to get to his feet. "At ease, Guns," Ben said quickly. "Any idea where Captain Stomper's wandered off to?"

"Sure thing. Him and that nurse went to the flicks, in town. Some newsreel guys wanted shots of his squiring her somewhere and you know him, he wouldn't pass up--"

Ben set off for the wire room at a run.

The entire section was a din of teletypes clacking and phones jangling. WRENs with messages in hand scurried off into the HQ staff's warren of offices. Forging his way through the traffic of messengers, Ben latched on to the owl-eyed

clerk blinking up at him in alarm from his keyboard. "Sir, we're on emergency priority, we can't send to TPWP without the commander's--"

"To hell with that. The buzz bomb that hit--where?"

"In the city, right in the center. Bad one, sir. There's a call out for ambulances from units all the way to Brussels." The clerk skimmed the message pad he was transcribing from. "The Belgian authorities keep calling the place a 'cinema' but our regs say 'movie'--"

Ben whirled, searching the room. Where was Maurice with the damn jeep when needed? *Up to his tonsils in there with the commander and the intelligence dummies who blew this, that's where.*

Abandoning the wire room, he wove his way back to his quarters at a trot, grabbed his flight jacket and crush hat and the pistol belt, and plunged out into the long maze of corridors to the hospital bunker. The scene there was the confusion of the wire room multiplied. Stretcher bearers were bringing in a steady bloodied stream of men, women, children--some so blackened with blast dust and dried blood you could not tell which they were. Army doctors and nurses swarmed around the stretcher cases, scissoring off clothing, shunting the prone patients into surgery or wards. Constantly dodging out of the way, Ben hunted down the medical staffer keeping track of the military wounded and dead, learned most of the victims were Antwerp civilians so far, and Moxie's and Inez's dogtags were not among those the staffer had copied onto his clipboard list. *Okay, they're among the missing,* Ben tried to reason himself into, *that's a different list.* They

could still be at the theater, Moxie by nature would take over any rescue task he could, she was a nurse--

The decision churning within him, Ben zeroed in on an ambulance driver outside under the archway smoking a cigarette. Throat dry--*Comparatively few direct hits compared to what?*--he stepped out into the wintry Antwerp night, calling to the driver: "Sarge, the movie theater that caught it--are you going back in?"

The driver stiffened but the cigarette stayed cupped in his saluting hand. "Probably all night, captain, why?"

"I'm riding with you."

The driver shrugged, not wanting any more trouble on the night. "If you want, you can hop in back. Hang on to something, we give it the gas going in."

Out the back windows of the jouncing ambulance he could see spikes of light driven into the blackness, searchlights on the hunt for buzz bombs. Whenever one was found, tracer bullets streaked toward it, the flaring bursts of larger ack-ack following, the sky over Antwerp like some hectic mosaic of fireworks. All through the careening ride he clung to a support of the triple-decker stretcher rack, watching through a porthole of the war that he knew might be his last view.

As soon as the ambulance stopped alongside others waiting to be loaded, he piled out. Unexpected brightness hit him. The market square with its avalanche of rubble, he saw from under his shielding hand, was like a movie set done by

madmen. Huge arc lights illuminated the void in the line of gabled facades where the movie theater had been. Under the glare of the arcs, the mountainous spill of brickwork and rafters, framed by the pale wall of the neighboring building the theater had torn away from, lay at rest in either stark light or grim shadow.

Rescue squads were prying up beams, military policemen were trying to direct the erratic traffic of ambulances and trucks bringing more squads. As if sleepwalking, Ben trudged farther into the scene where Hitler's rocket men had done their worst. Off to his left on the side of the square lay blanketed figure after figure. He helplessly counted as he passed the line of corpses; he quit at fifty.

It was cold in the blast-strewn square, his breath smoked from him in ghostly wreaths. Reaching a bit of open space where he could see all around, he scanned the chainlike ranks of rescuers on the rubble heap for Moxie's lean form, Inez's broadset one.

Suddenly, across the street from what had been the marqueed front of the theater, he spotted the tall newsreel cameraman from the troupe.

As fast as he could reach there without slipping on the blood on the cobblestones, he came up beside the man as he was busy reloading the big shoulder camera. "Where's Captain Stamper? *Where's Captain Stamper*?"

The cameraman turned and gave him a foggy look. Then realization came, and the eyes begged. "You didn't hear? Hell, I'm sorry, Mike must have missed you, I sent him back to the base for more film, he was supposed to tell Loudon. I've got to stay here and keep shooting--"

Ben grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "Just tell me what happened, goddamn it!"

The cameraman blanched, backing off to his small stack of equipment. He tenderly put down his camera and picked up something from the pile. "Maybe you better see this for yourself." He held the thing out to Ben.

It was a peaked officer's cap with leather brim, the kind that went with dress uniform. Taking it from him, Ben grasped the cap in both hands for a moment and then slowly tipped it over to look inside, already knowing. In the garish light cast by the arcs he could make out the inking on the hatband:

LIKE HELL IT'S YOURS. THIS CAP BELONGS TO CAPT. MOXIE STAMPER SERIAL # 19071353.

He looked the only question left to the cameraman.

"All we wanted were a couple of shots of him and her going up to the ticket window holding hands, like they were out on a date." The cameraman pointed across to the collapsed front of the theater, a chunk of the marquee with the enormous maroon letters REX sitting in the street crookedly but otherwise strangely unharmed. "They weren't even going in, the movie had already started. These old buildings"--his hand shook as he motioned up at the ornamented guildhall gables--"Loudon had that major scout these out, he told us it would make a terrific backdrop. So, we were just doing a second take, everything going fine, when the bomb hit."

Ben stared into the empty air where the balcony of the theater would have been, the projection room, the offices above, and then to where it had all fallen into a crumbled heap of bricks and broken wood and bodies.

The cameraman followed his gaze and hesitantly told the rest. "We were across the street here, it made a nice angle shot, the marquee there... Mike's my sound man, he was knocked over by the blast. I got thrown around pretty good myself. Just as everything started to, to come down"--the man wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and managed to speak again-- "the captain grabbed his cap off and threw it to us while he pulled the nurse to him with his other arm and covered her with himself. I don't know how he did both at once."

"He was an athlete," Ben said dully. The cap in hand, he turned and walked off to catch a ride to the base in one of the ambulances.

"Hey, captain, uh, sir?" the cameraman called after him. "Do me a favor? Lug this film back for me?" He gestured up at the night sky, quiet at the moment, tracer-lit a minute ago. "In case something more happens here?"

Ben took the film can and kept on walking toward the ambulances.

Climbing out at the hospital bunker, he handed the cap to one of the medics. "Give this to the guy taking down names. Tell him Nurse Mazzetti was with the captain."

The long tunnel of bunker corridors resounded to his footsteps as he headed for the Wonder Bar, his mind cold and clear. Inevitability was claiming him. →

The wall of oblivion had moved closer one more notch, its tenth, Moxie the next to last off the living list. The others, back at the start--O'Fallon, Havel--and on up the black climb of odds--Friesen, Vic, Prokosch, Animal--and off the chart of any foretelling--Dex, even Danzer, Jake--teamed one final time in his resolve. He was giving himself over. With Moxie gone he was the eleventh man, the perverse odds now solely out to get him and they would, he could see them piled overhead as if he were in the bottom of an hourglass looking at the deathly sand above. He knew it would happen according to the war's whim of time, when he would go out into the Antwerp night after doing this. If a buzz bomb did not find him this night, something else ultimately would. A leftover booby trap in whatever hiding place he sought out. A guildhall wall, wearied by the constant return of war, collapsing on him. The Germans barreling into the city, if the Bulge was not turned back, and dooming him in their pogrom of able-bodied defenders. He accepted, he couldn't not, that the war would see to him, one fatal way or another. But first, this. He could find no reason in himself not to rid the world of Loudon. The .45 still had bullets in its clip.

Ben entered the hubbub of the Wonder Bar. Several members of the USO troupe were beside the stage signing autographs for early-comers, the confectionary colors of the singers and dancers glossy against the olive drab of the G.I.s. Loudon and the major, in conference at the show director's desk, spotted him and waved him over frantically.

"Ben! We've been looking everywhere for you." Loudon's words came faster than ever. "It's Moxie, he's--" The expression on Ben stopped him. "You heard. You're upset. Can't blame you."

Ben dropped the film can on the desk with a clatter.

"This is what's left of him."

(Beneath the snap-brim hat the eyes guardedly)

~~Loudon's eyes~~ darted down, then back to Ben. "Awful, what happened. We've got to make this into a tribute to him. Sit down, why don't you, we'll work over the script with--"

"I need a few minutes with you, Loudon. Just us. Now."

"Use my office," the major offered, all solicitude.

As soon as the door was shut, Loudon started again. "My God, who could have imagined this. Moxie the tenth one, I mean, there's no story ever like it." The chin doing the checkmark, confirming to himself the Supreme Team saga. "You and me--well, no way it can be called lucky, watching it happen to all those poor guys, but at least we saw to it that they'll always be remembered." He sat down at the major's desk and beckoned Ben over. "Okay, the script, we have to make changes." The undercurrent of excitement still was in his voice. "Got your copy?"

Ben made no move toward the desk. As much as he had always despised the sportswriter, he at last realized Loudon in his darkest unacknowledged self wanted the whole team dead. Dead and buttered. Fit to serve up in his radio show, his newsreel, his newspaper column, probably a book. *The Eleven Who Donned the Uniform*, or something worse.

"Ben? We need to get going on this script. It's less than an hour to airtime and--"

"Shut up, Loudmouth." Ben's hand twitched against the pistol holster. He did not care whether Loudon noticed or not. "You're poison, you and your goddamn airtime and the rest, you're the death of the whole team. All the way back to Purcell."

Loudon looked at him, blank as a flatfish. The automatic velocity of voice started up: "Hey, let's not say anything we'll regret, I know it hits you hard about Mox--" The yammer stopped as suddenly as it started, something coming into Loudon's eyes now. "Purcell? Why bring that up?"

"You were in on it. You stood there with your hands in your pockets and watched Bruno run him to death."

"Ben, listen, you got it wrong. Bruno didn't have it in for Purcell, he had big plans for him on the team if he could turn him into enough of a man."

"He turned him into a dead kid."

"Sometimes things get pushed harder than anyone intended." Whatever it was in Loudon's eyes was matched now by the insinuation in his words. "It still bugs you that Bruno was turning Purcell into a starter, doesn't it. The team would've looked pretty different to you then, hey, Ben?"

"You slippery bastard, where did you come up with that, Purcell on the starting team? We had almost a week of practices yet before the season, Danzer had plenty of time to get his act--" Ben halted.

"*In for Reinking at left end, Merle Purcell,*" Loudon maliciously mimicked broadcasting the substitution.

"What the hell are you talking about? I was captain of the team."

"That would have changed in a hurry if you were on the bench." The words came out of Loudon as if he couldn't resist the taste of them. "Bruno was going to bump you to the scrub team before the opening game, like that. Told me so, had me hold the story until he could put football religion into Purcell, on the Hill." He snapped his fingers. "He'd never give up on Danzer. Danzer was one of his. You weren't, sucker."

It reached all through Ben. "Then I'm not--" Purcell was the eleventh man. The famously hexed lineup picked by Bruno at that last practice--*I'm not on the list.* The freedom from the odds built upon that jinx day dizzied him. Death had made its clean sweep. The skew in the law of averages brought on by Bruno's manipulations on the practice field and Loudon's at the microphone, that entire fatal scheme of things was not necessarily meant to have a place for Ben Reinking. He was odd man out. *Am.* The inevitability lifted from him. From here on, if the war claimed him, it would have to do it on its own terms, not by the Supreme Team's wholesale bad luck. A crazy laugh broke from Ben. No, he realized, the sanest one in a long time.

"Okay, we both have it out of our systems," Loudon was saying, nervous at that laugh. "Now let's forget all that and get busy on the script, airtime will be here in--"

"I'm not going on the show."

Loudon gaped at him.

"The Supreme Team is yours, it always was." Ben found he could say it calmly. "Give it a funeral any way you want."

"Listen, Reinking--Ben." Loudon's voice rose. "We don't have to be pals about this, we just have to do the show. You'll get your gravy from this as much as I will. Everything's set up for us. The network time. The news cameras. The whole USO--"

A rap on the door and the major was in the room almost before the sound. "I couldn't help hearing the ruckus. Something I can help with?"

"It's him," Loudon flared. "Says he won't go on the show. Drive some sense into him, major."

"You most certainly are going on the show," the major scolded Ben as if he were a Sunday schooler. "I've looked over Ted's script, you're everywhere in it. Let's not complicate things for him."

"Let's."

The major took another look at Ben. "Captain, I order you to pick up that script and prepare for the show." Loudon at the desk whacked his hand down on his copy to second that.

"Not a chance, major," Ben said, stepping away. "I am a TPWP war correspondent, I have a story to write about what killed Moxie Stamper, and I am going out that door now and write it."

Commotion had spread to the other side of the door, from the sound of it. The major raised his voice, "Quiet, out there! We're in conference in--"

He stopped short at the sight of Maurice Overby striding in, military policemen in white helmets and white spats on either side of him, two more taking up a station at the door.

Maurice paused, glanced at the major's angry face and Loudon's angrier one, and raised his eyebrows at Ben. "Have we come at an inconvenient moment?"

"I don't know how you got wind of this, lieutenant, but you're right in time," the major recovered. "Have your MPs ready." He leveled a deaconly finger at Ben. "How does arrest for disobeying an order from a superior officer and a Section Eight sound to you, Reinking? If you don't--"

"Actually, sir," Maurice broke in as if to save the major the trouble of saying more, "I'm here on orders from considerably higher up. I speak of the general. We"--Maurice swept his hand around graciously to indicate the military police contingent--"are to place Captain Reinking aboard a plane. In the word from HQ command, 'soonest.'"

I hope I heard that right. I hope I'm not dreaming this.

Loudon's face went from bad to worse, a good sign to Ben. "This man can't go anywhere," the major protested. "He's to be on the show or else--"

"I beg to differ, sir." Not without a bit of flourish, Maurice produced a set of paperwork. "He is being sent forthwith 'stateside,' again in the phrasing of the order. I have that order here should you wish to examine it, major." The major did not touch it. Maurice nodded to the MPs, who moved in around Ben like bodyguards. "So. If you'll make your farewells, captain, we can be on our way."

Ben looked straight at Loudon and said as if it was a vow, "See you in the movies, sucker."

Within the wedge of MPs, the blue-clad RAF officer and the flight-jacketed American cut through the gathering crowd in the Wonder Bar and swung out into the long bunker corridor where the footsteps were their own.

"Maurice, am I ~~dreaming this~~ completely wacko," Ben asked urgently out the side of his mouth, "or were you bluffing back there?"

"Not at all," came the benign reply. "I might admit to providing a pinch of dramatic effect in the matter, but that's all. No, you are in mightier hands than mine. Your TPWP people had to come clean in their 'urgent' message a bit ago to convince HQ command you're worth high priority. A home-state Senator--is that the phrase for a political old tusker in America?--raised rather a ruckus about the number of soldiers' lives your Montana has contributed to the war. I believe you know whereof I speak." The New Zealander turned a solemn gaze on him, then resumed. "All in all, it has become in Tepee Weepy's best interest to fetch you back alive and in one piece as speedily as can be." Maurice patted the side pocket of his uniform jacket. "I procured you a copy of all that, it should make pleasant reading on the plane. I don't mean to take the cherry off the top ahead of you, but I do think you'd like to know, Ben--you're to be mustered out as soon as you're back at that base in Montana and write the piece about Stamper."

At the mouth of the bunker was a stocky MP with a two-way radio clapped to his ear. He held up a hand like the traffic cop he had probably been in civilian life. "Hold it here, everybody--ack-ack is tracking one in."

In the shelter of the concrete archway, Ben and Maurice and the armbanded soldiers watched the sudden cat's cradle of searchlight beams over Antwerp. The arcs of white frozen lightning swung and swung, hunting, until fastening onto a glint far up in the black sky. Flashes from gun batteries pulsed on the low horizon, and as the flying bomb seemed to slow and hesitate, tracer bullets converged toward it like the ascending lines where the arches of a cathedral meet. Then the buzz bomb lost course, faltering off in a drifting glide, away from the battered durable old city.

"One less to worry about," Maurice pronounced briskly. Turning to Ben, he tapped his watch. "Fifteen minutes. The plane can take off in ten." Choked up, Ben could only shake hands wordlessly. The stubby lieutenant gave him an unreserved smile. "Fare thee well, Ben Reinking. Happy ride home."

The jeep thrummed under him on the steel grid of runway as it raced toward the plane, the guardian MPs riding shotgun front and back, the war behind him in the darkness. With luck--it was an amazing feeling to trust that word again--within three days the hopscotch of flights would deliver him back to East Base. Back within reach of the woman he would never get over. In the whirl of his thoughts the memorized lines of her letter danced to and fro. *"I cou*

John him while he was in the Pacific, and I can't do it to you by lett

it'll all sort out okay after the war. But that's too far away to think.

wasn't, now.

Flooded almost to tears with the rapture of survival, Ben unloaded from the jeep the instant it screeched to a halt and raced toward the hatchway of the

thoughts the memorized lines of her letter danced to and fro. *"I couldn't Dear John him while he was in the Pacific, and I can't do it to you by letter. Maybe it'll all sort out okay after the war. But that's too far away to think."* But it wasn't, now.

Flooded almost to tears with the rapture of survival, Ben unloaded from the jeep the instant it screeched to a halt and raced toward the hatchway of the

p. 442

p. 441

out

Wording on page 442:
I can't do it to you while you're over there

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revving plane. *You're getting giddy, Reinking. If not now, when?* With his war over, in his every heartbeat he could feel the surge of his chances with Cass. A woman with no regrets, two men--

He did not even have to calculate. All the rest of his life, should he live forever, he gladly would take odds that good.

Acknowledgments

This is a work of fiction, and so my characters exist only in these pages. There is, however, a breath of actuality to the plot premise of World War Two's disproportionate toll on a given number of young men who had played football together: by the accounts available, eleven starting players of Montana State College in Bozeman did perish in that conflict. I am indebted to my late friend, Dave Walter of the Montana Historical Society, for providing me the pieces of that quilt of lore. Research virtuoso of the state's past that he was, Dave also furnished a vivid sense of conscientious objector life in the Montana woods during the war in his history of the Civilian Public Service Camp at Belton, Montana, *Rather Than War.*

Montana's war losses are summed up in another key historical study, *Montana, A History of Two Centuries* by Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang: "As in World War I, Montana contributed more than its share of military manpower--roughly forty thousand men by 1942--and the state's death rate in the war was exceeded only by New Mexico's."

A number of the women who piloted miltary aircraft in 1942-44 as WASPs--Women Air Force Service Pilots--learned to fly in the Civilian Pilot Training program before the war, as I had Cass Standish do. There were 916 WASPs--141 of those in the Air Transport Command, as Cass's ferry squadron would have been--when their branch of the service was disbanded ("inactivated") in December, 1944. Thirty-eight women military pilots lost their lives in the course of duty. While East Base in Great Falls, Montana, was indeed a hub of ferrying Lend-Lease fighters, bombers, and cargo planes north to Alaska

and Soviet Union aircrews waiting there--the total is listed as 7,926 aircraft--the presence of Cass's flying women at East Base and on the route to Edmonton is my own creation.

Similarly, I have taken literary leeway with a few settings in the book. Citizens of Great Falls will find that I have put non-existent Treasure State University on about the site of C.M. Russell High School, and the Letter Hill in back of it. Hill 57 did exist. The Reinkings' town of Gros Ventre and the Two Medicine country remain as I originated them in my Montana Trilogy, imagined versions that draw on the actual geography in and around Dupuyer, the hospitable armful of town of my high school years.

The Office of War Information from 1942 until 1945 had various sections involved in war news for domestic consumption, but the Threshold Press War Project, "Tepee Weepy," was foisted on it by my imagination.

In my characters' combat experiences, I have sometimes drawn on oral history accounts, memoirs, and unit histories for touches of detail. One source in particular I would like to single out, my late writing colleague and friend, Alvin Josephy. When we coincided at the Fishtrap "Writing and the West" Conference at Wallowa Lake, Oregon, in 1994, I heard Alvin's recording of the amphibious landing at Guam, and his memoir *A Walk Toward Oregon* has a further account of his wading the bullet-pocked surf with that microphone as a Marine combat correspondent. Ben Reinking's narration and specific experiences of the Guam invasion are invented by me, but the spirit of Alvin Josephy surely goes ashore with him. As to a few other military instances of where actuality leaves off and the author begins:

--Many Montana soldiers did serve in the long and terrible jungle fighting in New Guinea, Biak, and the Philippines. The Montaneers regiment that held Carl Friessen, Dexter Cariston, and Dan Standish is my own version of such a unit.

--The U.S. Coast Guard in the middle years of the war did patrol the Olympic Peninsula coastline with dogs. The balloon bombs launched by Japan occurred a bit later in the war than I have portrayed; the first of the 32-foot balloons with an incendiary device was reported in November, 1944, and across the remainder of the war an estimated one thousand of nine thousand launched may have reached the American mainland. At least six persons were killed, although I know of no instance of a Coastguardsman encountering a balloon bomb as Sig Prokosch did.

--Antwerp in the last autumn and winter of the war did suffer attacks of a severity reminiscent of the Luftwaffe's earlier bombing blitz of London: more than five thousand buzz bombs were launched against the Belgian city and its strategic port in 154 days. The casualty figures are given as 3,752 civilians and 731 Allied servicemen killed. Behind a screen of heavy news censorship, a combined Allied anti-aircraft artillery command of 22,000 personnel was deployed against the V-1, and later V-2, flying bombs.

In this novel's inflections of life in uniform, certain phrasings and observations are drawn from my own military experience as an Air Force reservist on active duty during the Cuban missile crisis.

Lastly, a considerable community of friends, acquaintances, and research institutions provided me information, advice, or other aid, and I deeply thank them all: the University of Washington libraries; the Coast Guard Museum of the Northwest, and director Gene Davis; the Montana Historical Society, and Molly Kruckenberg, Brian

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