

# Dog Robber

Jim Colling Adventure Series  
Book I

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To my wife, Margie, who read the drafts and asked the right questions, and whose support was essential to tell the story of Jim Colling and Elizabeth Hamilton. I dedicate Dog Robber to her, with my love.

## Prologue

April, 1945

The American officer had been crouched in a depression behind a fallen pine tree since just after midnight. He shifted his weight as quietly as possible, and winced at the pain in his cramped calves. The pale early-spring dawn had begun to spread through the northern Italian mountains around him. Light was filtering slowly through the haze that had not yet disappeared from among the pines, and he resumed his vigil, peering intently through the tree's broken branches. Through breaks in the treetops, he could just make out portions of the logging road that ran along the curve of the slope below his position. Nothing moved, and he felt the nervousness that had been with him in varying degrees throughout the night become more acute.

He was not a veteran of combat, or even really trained for it. He had experienced his share of shellings and bombings as his unit had moved slowly northward through Italy, but this was the first time he had actually found himself this close to the front lines. The insignia on the collars of his shirt under his field jacket indicated he was a major assigned to the Signal Corps. He was used to being a mile or so behind the lines, his contact with the enemy limited to eavesdropping on their radio transmissions. The newspapers said that the German defenses were "collapsing," but he was astute enough to know that pockets of resistance still remained, and he was concerned that his small detachment would have the misfortune to encounter some group of diehards, especially if they were Waffen SS or paratroopers.

The fact that he was able to speak and understand German well enough to be capable of eavesdropping and interviewing prisoners of war was the main reason he now found himself this far out in front of the advancing American army. He shifted the carbine in his hands so that its barrel pointed forward. The soldiers who had been assigned to accompany him were volunteers from the Tenth Mountain, and he took some comfort in their seasoned appearance and attitude. Lieutenant Schwartz was somewhere to his left, and two enlisted men, Bergman and Cohn, were to his right. He could just see the olive-drab top of the helmet of one of them. All his companions had Thompson submachine guns, and he was confident in their ability to use them. He hoped they would not have the need to test their proficiency.

The faint sound of an engine down the slope and to his left grew in intensity. Its pitch was too high to be that of a tank, and he guessed that what he was hearing was a truck laboring up the steep rutted road. The driver was downshifting and pressing the accelerator to get the most out of an over-used engine and low-grade gasoline. The vehicle passed an opening in the trees, and he caught a glimpse of the familiar shape of a Fiat, painted Wehrmacht gray. The truck's engine was roaring as it reached the level clearing where they had arranged for

the meeting to take place, but quieted to a still-labored idle once the little Italian truck was no longer being forced to make the climb.

The American major watched as a figure in German Feldgrau opened the passenger door of the truck's cab and stepped to the ground. The uniform was immaculate, the silver rank insignia and decorations on the front of his tunic contrasting with its sober grayness. The American wondered to himself how Kraut officers always managed to look as if they had just come from a dress parade.

The German swept his eyes across the forested hill in front of him, finally looking directly at where the Americans were hidden. He shouted something over his shoulder, and the truck's driver swung down from the cab, a submachine gun suspended from his neck. Two more German soldiers, also carrying submachine guns, vaulted over the tailgate and took up positions at the rear of the Fiat.

Cupping his hands to his mouth, the German officer called out in German, "All is quiet. You may come down. I am 'Otto.'"

"And I am 'Fred,'" replied the Major in German as he emerged from the woods and walked towards the SS officer. Lieutenant Schwartz and Corporal Bergman warily followed him, Thompsons at the ready.

"Guten Tag," the German greeted the American, extending his hand. The American didn't take it.

Instead he responded, "Greetings, Sturmbannführer," noting the man's SS rank insignia, and continuing in German, "Do you have the goods?"

"Of course, Herr Major," replied the SS officer, glancing at the gold oak leaves on the American's shirt. "Step this way," he gestured towards the rear of the truck, ordering his men to drop the tailgate.

The major peered into the dark interior of the Fiat's bed and saw nothing until one of the German soldiers shone a flashlight inside. Wide-eyed faces stared back. A child whimpered and was instantly silenced.

"Raus, Juden!" shouted one of the soldiers, waving his submachine gun for emphasis, and displaying a familiar enjoyment with the task that caused the American officer to grit his teeth.

He turned on the German officer, "Tell your men to desist from addressing these people in that way. You shall, from this minute, treat them with respect. They are no longer your prisoners."

The Sturmbannführer seemed surprised at the American's outburst, but he instructed his men to do as the American had asked.

The ten men, twelve women and five children who eventually emerged from the truck looked as if they were on their last legs. One of the women collapsed as soon as she was lowered to the ground. The American officer quickly ordered everyone to sit down, hoping to avoid anyone else dropping in their tracks. While watching the former prisoners being assisted from the Fiat, the American had been dimly aware that another vehicle had reached the clearing, coming from the opposite direction than that of the Germans.

The big US Army truck pulled to a stop several yards from the Wehrmacht vehicle. PFC Benjamin Cohn, a Thompson submachine gun resting on his hip, jumped down from the truck's running board. He took one look at the huddled group of individuals sitting on the ground, and with a cursory request to Lieutenant Schwartz for permission to get rations and water for the refugees, he went to the back of the American truck, and was soon distributing K rations and passing around canteens.

Lieutenant Schwartz came to stand beside the major and said in a low voice, "Want us to get rid of these Krauts, sir?"

The major replied, "No, Lieutenant. General McKimmon's guaranteed them a safe conduct. If we welch on it, it will screw things up royally as far as future cooperation is concerned, and you and your men will get the court martial of all court martials."

The American major had been studying the former prisoners and after a few moments, he asked the SS officer, "They are all Jews?"

"Yes, Herr Major."

"And they were all assigned to the facility at Oldenberg?"

"Yes, all."

"They do not seem to be in any shape to have performed technical work."

The SS officer sniffed, "Compared to many others, they have been well-treated. Plenty to eat, medical care, nice warm place to sleep. They are the lucky ones. They appear as they do because of the difficulty of transporting them to this place."

"Which ones are the Poles?" asked the American officer.

“None. These are all Jews, no gentiles. The Poles were moved before I could obtain a requisition and the proper papers,” replied the Sturmbannführer.

“The Poles were most important to us. I thought that was made perfectly clear.”

“Understood. But I can do only what is possible. You realize the risks that I and my men have taken even to do this.”

“My general has made arrangements that you and your men will be recognized for this, as promised,” said the American, more than a hint of irony in his voice.

“The war cannot last much longer, Herr Major. I wish only that it shall be remembered that I and my men, SS men all, saved the lives of some Jews. I think that will be most important to us in the future.”

The American major gave the German officer an icy look, then said, “You may return to your lines, Sturmbannführer.”

As he watched the Germans climb into their Fiat and chug away, he wondered whether any of the SS men would survive the war, and if any of them did, whether what had occurred here this day would make any difference to them. He shouted at Lieutenant Schwartz that it was time to load up their charges so they could return to their own lines.

## **Chapter One**

August-September, 1945

Private James T. Colling watched the green fields and orchards of the Belgian countryside roll past the window of his railway carriage. He found it difficult to reconcile what he was seeing with the newsreels of battles that had occurred here only a few months ago. If he had left college to enlist a year earlier, as he had wished, he would have been part of it. As it was, his father had convinced him to finish his second year, and the Germans had surrendered two weeks before classes ended. During basic training, everyone in his company had expected to be part of the invasion of Japan. But for the success of the Manhattan Project, his life, like many others, might have taken an altogether different direction. Now fate, and the unfathomable administrative processes of the U.S. Army, had decided he would be part of the occupation of Germany.

Hostilities in this part of Europe had concluded nearly eight months before, and the first summer of peace for the Belgians in five years was coming to an end. The last remnants of scorched, rusting hulks of trucks and other military vehicles were still sometimes seen, scattered along the sides of the roads that occasionally chanced to parallel the railway tracks. Civilians in small groups were here and there picking over the salvageable remnants, apparently continuing to find bits and pieces that would bring some money from the scrap dealers. Colling calculated that some of them must have been scavenging for almost a year, and winter would probably see the disappearance into some final junkyard of the last, most obvious evidence that armies had once faced each other on this plain.

The fields that ran to the hills on the horizon presented a green contrast to the gray shabbiness of the towns and cities through which the train rolled. For the first time in five years, the farmers would not see their crops requisitioned by an occupying army. It seemed to Colling that they might have come back to the soil with an unusual enthusiasm that boded well for a good harvest.

Here in the countryside, the smell of masonry dust that had permeated the air in the urban areas through which they had passed was absent. The sky itself seemed bluer and clearer. From the way that recent issues of Life and Newsweek portrayed what lay ahead in Germany, Colling expected that the optimism he seemed to sense in Belgium, technically one of the winners in the conflict, would not survive once he crossed the border to the losing side.

He glanced at the five other American soldiers who were his travelling companions. They were slouched in their seats, their eyes closed, sleeping or trying to. From the insignia on their uniforms, he knew that they were Signal Corps men, and their service stripes and ribbons, together with the fact that they were all wearing the new unofficial “Ike” jackets, advertised that they had much more military experience than he. The chevrons on their sleeves also told him that all of them out-ranked him, so that when they had first filed into the compartment in Antwerp, the reticence towards non-commissioned officers he had learned in basic training had prevailed, and he had not initiated any conversation. Other than a nod of acknowledgement in his direction,

none of them had said anything before leaning back and closing their eyes or pulling their caps down over their faces.

The railway car in which they were riding had seen better days. Below the window, a piece of plywood served as a patch in its side, and there were other signs that it might have been the target of gunfire in the recent past. The carriage swayed and bounced constantly, confirming the dilapidated state of tracks that had been repaired too many times. Perhaps because of the movement, Colling found himself dozing, and he eventually dropped off into a light sleep.

He had not closed his eyes for nearly 24 hours. He had been too restless to sleep as the transport sailed up the estuary into Antwerp near midnight, and he had gone to stand at the rail with his fellow soldiers, taking in his first impression of the buildings and lights of Europe drifting by. It seemed that simultaneously with the ship's docking had come the shouted orders to prepare for disembarkation. Leaving the transport did not occur as rapidly. After better than an hour standing packed together on the transport's deck with their baggage at their feet, the troops were finally hustled down the gangplank to the floodlighted wharf, where non-commissioned officers and port officials wearing black armbands with "Transportation Corps" emblazoned in white were sorting the men out in preparation for the next leg of the journey. More waiting followed. Like everyone else, Colling eventually dropped his duffel bag and used it to sit on, but he was too distracted by the new sounds, sights and smells around him to do so immediately.

The NCOs continued to search their clip-boards and call off names as they directed the men on the quay into groups. It was more than an hour before he heard his name called, and he was directed to a line of fifteen or twenty men. A corporal wearing one of the Transportation Corps brassards called Colling's group to attention and marched them to the train, where assignments to specific cars and compartments were made. That had been before dawn, and it was now mid-afternoon.

A sudden rough jarring of the car, accompanied by a series of metallic clanking noises, woke him. A stooped gray-haired conductor glanced into their compartment and moved on. A few minutes later, there was the sound of movement and voices in the companionway, and a pair of railway officials wearing a different style of uniform walked past, speaking in German, and he realized that they must be changing crews in preparation for entering Germany.

The stop had awakened his companions, and they were looking out the window and asking where they were.

Colling offered, "Germany, I think. We're in the British Zone right now. The train crew that just came on was speaking German, and those are British MPs on the platform outside." He extended his hand to the nearest signalman, "Hi, I'm Jim Colling."

As he leaned across to shake Colling's hand, he introduced himself as Joe Vitarelli. The three chevrons with a "T" underneath on his sleeves marked him as a sergeant technician fourth grade. Vitarelli went on to give the names of the other four men seated in the compartment, pointing to each of them as he did so. They, in turn, each gave a short greeting as they shook hands with Colling.

The accents that he was hearing told Colling the men were probably from the New York-New Jersey area. Vitarelli confirmed that supposition when he announced that he and his friends were from New York; then he asked, "Where you from, kid?"

Colling replied, "Wisconsin. A little town called Belle Cors. Most people haven't heard of it. It's actually about half-way between Milwaukee and St. Paul, Minnesota."

Vitarelli gave him a quizzical smile, "You just get drafted?"

"No, I signed up."

"Jesus, why?"

The other signalmen laughed at the way Vitarelli emphasized the "why?" in his response.

"It was back in June. I figured I had to, and I thought I'd be going to Japan."

"Lucky for you we got the A-bomb. Looks like the Japs are gonna give up."

"Yeah," said Colling, "All the guys in my basic training company actually had orders for the West Coast, and when we went to get on the train, they sent us the opposite direction, to Charleston. There was about twenty of us who were enlistees, and they put us on a steamer for Europe."

"Well, it looks like none of us is going to see the States for awhile."

"You guys over here long?"

One of Vitarelli's friends spoke up, "Ever since '42. We was all in the National Guard together in New York. Second New York Signal Company."

"Federalized into the 485th Signal Company," said Vitarelli, adding, "Yeah, we all joined the National Guard long before Pearl Harbor."

"By mistake," said a little corporal sitting near the compartment door.

"Come on, Dobson," said Vitarelli, "You did it for the money, just like the rest of us."

"Yeah, Dobson," said the other tech-four sitting next to Vitarelli, "You liked that check from Uncle Sam. Times was hard."

"My wife liked it better," replied Dobson, and the other soldiers laughed.

Vitarelli explained, "I joined the Guard, 'cause it was twenty bucks drill pay every three months, and full Army pay for summer maneuvers. I had a good job with the phone company, but the extra cash was a big help."

"Yeah, Joe, things was just fine until we got federalized in '41," said the tech-four who had spoken earlier. Turning to Colling, he went on, "We got called up in time for the Louisiana maneuvers. That was a crock of shit, I have to tell you. Just like Noah, it rained forty days and forty nights."

"And now, instead of sending us home, we get to go and rebuild Germany," said Dobson.

"But you guys have been in a long time," said Colling. "You should be heading home for discharge."

"Not the way it works, kid," said Vitarelli. "We do not have enough points, and you need eighty-five to qualify for discharge."

"But you've been over here for more than three years," responded Colling.

The tech-four sneered, "Yeah, but in England, not in combat. We've spent the last three years giving Scotland the best damn telephone system in the world."

Vitarelli came back at him; "Right, Al, but at least we weren't at Normandy, getting our asses shot off." He turned to Colling, "See, the limeys gave the Air Force all these airfields in Scotland to use, and there wasn't enough phone lines, so we had to run 'em. We was all over Scotland, and even down in England some," and speaking to the other signalmen, he said, "And you guys have to admit it was good duty. Them Scottish lassies was real friendly... especially the ones whose husbands was off fighting the war."

The signalmen nodded their heads in agreement. Al and Dobson began discussing the comparative virtues of Scottish women versus American girls, versus Italian females, and Colling quietly took it all in. The other signalmen interjected their own opinions, causing the argument to become more intense.

Vitarelli had not joined in, and he leaned back and turned to Colling, "Yeah, well, it wasn't so bad," he said. He looked up at the ceiling. "Jesus," he exclaimed.

Everyone looked up at once to where he was staring. A piece of ragged plywood had been nailed to the ceiling of the compartment, and was now hanging down a few inches, apparently dislodged as a result of the train's movement and vibration. Daylight could be seen above it.

"Shit," said Al, "Them's bullet holes. This here train must have got the once-over from one of our bombers."

"More likely a P-51 or '47 on a strafing run," said the tech-four whom Colling had heard the others call Hank, with an air of superior knowledge.

Having realized that the top of the car had been penetrated, the men almost as one looked down to see if they had missed corresponding holes in the floor of the compartment. They found it intact.

Colling called their attention to the similar piece of plywood under the window.

"Shit, it's a wonder this Goddamn train is still running," said Al.

"You think anyone got killed in here?" asked Dobson, slightly nervous.

"Well, if they did, somebody did a good job of cleaning up the mess," said Vitarelli. This caused all the signalmen to begin examining the upholstery for bloodstains and bullet holes. Finding none, they continued to speculate among themselves on how many Germans might have been slaughtered by the machine guns of the strafing plane.

Their conversation was cut short when the door to the compartment was slid open by a thin-faced German wearing a dirty raincoat. A soiled shirt collar and threadbare tie showed above the lapels of the raincoat. The man stepped into the crowded compartment and in heavily accented English, asked, "Do any of you wish to exchange for German currency?"

Dobson was the first to speak, "All's we got is English money."

“That is good,” said the German. “I can make you trade for German marks. You will need them for the beer and the ladies, now you are in Germany.”

The signalmen began bringing out their wallets. Dobson held out some folded bills to the German, “Here’s five pounds.”

The German pulled a folded leather case from the inside pocket of his raincoat. He began leafing through the banknotes that it held. After extracting several bills, which he quickly counted, he said to Dobson, “Here, my friend, is your money, one hundred marks, Allied Military Currency. Good money for Germany.”

Colling reached up and stopped Dobson’s arm as he was about to hand his money to the German. Staring into the man’s face, Colling spoke in German, “Ein moment, Herr Geldwechsler. If it is correct what I have read in yesterday’s Stars and Stripes, the mark trades properly at ten American cents. At somewhat over four dollars the pound is, making five pounds worth more than twenty dollars. This man here is entitled to over two hundred marks. I fear that you are cheating him.”

With a startled expression, the money-changer backed away as Colling reached for him, and eluding Colling, stepped quickly into the companionway and hurried away.

“What was that all about?” asked Dobson.

“He was getting ready to screw you, I think,” replied Vitarelli.

Colling explained to Dobson that the German was trying to give him half as many German marks as his five pounds would bring at the American Express office, bringing forth a stream of curses and threats to the absent money-changer from the little corporal.

Vitarelli interrupted his diatribe to ask Colling, “Where did you learn to speak Kraut?”

“My dad’s mother,” responded Colling. “She lives with my mom and dad, and they all encouraged me to learn the language. There’s lots of Germans in my home town, and it helped my dad’s business to be able to talk to them.”

Vitarelli asked Colling what business his father was in, and Colling described his father’s drug store in Belle Cors. He told the sergeant how he started out jerking sodas, then moved up to working behind the prescription counter and delivering prescriptions. Vitarelli spoke of his work for the Bell Telephone Company before the war, and of his wife and two children, showing Colling snapshots from his wallet. The other signalmen talked quietly among themselves, dozed or simply sat looking out the train window.

Colling had taken notice in passing of the signs on the railway stations at each stop that revealed that the first German city they had traveled through was Aachen, and that they had then turned south, passing eventually through Bonn. Picturing in his mind the occupation map of Germany that he had seen in Life, he was aware that they had passed through the British Zone and were skirting the French Zone to their west. The conversation in the compartment had distracted him from the scenery outside, and when he and Vitarelli paused in their discussion, he was able to pay more attention to what could be seen from the train window. Destruction was more evident outside than it had been in Belgium, if that were possible. The people he saw looked dirty, tired and despondent, and he realized he was seeing the outward signs of a defeated people. He felt no pity for them, however, having convinced himself that they had chosen leaders who had brought them to this state. Despite his conscious acceptance of their fate, he was unable to shake off a sense of sadness that he had not experienced previously.

Ever since he had left home to go to college, Colling had made it a habit to write his parents at least once a week, and when there was a pause in the conversation with Vitarelli, Colling dug into his bag and brought out the leather folder that held his stationery. As Colling uncapped his fountain pen and started to write, Vitarelli pulled his garrison cap over his face and leaned his head back on his seat. Colling’s last letter home had been mailed the day before he left basic training camp, so Colling filled six pages with a description of the ocean voyage, his arrival in Europe, and his impressions of what he had seen since leaving Antwerp. When he had finished, he placed the addressed envelope in his inside jacket pocket, promising himself he would look for a place to mail it at the next stop.

It was early evening when the transition from open country to shattered buildings and heaps of broken masonry signaled their approach to another German city. At the stops in each major city over the past few hours, a conductor had walked the cars, calling out the place-name. This time was no different, and they soon heard the German shouting a guttural, “Frankfurt Am Main.”

Before the train came to a full stop, they were all on their feet, pulling their bags off the overhead racks. The final lurch threw them against each other, and then, the railway car motionless, they stood waiting, unconsciously whispering in the unaccustomed quiet. Colling shook Vitarelli's hand, "Nice to have met you, Sarge. I doubt we'll ever run into each other again, but if you're ever down in the 61st Division area, look me up." Vitarelli thanked Colling for saving Dobson's cash, and hearing him, Dobson repeated his own thanks. A Signal Corps captain came down the companionway, shouting for the 485th. to de-train, and the signalmen shambled out of the compartment. Colling followed close behind, his duffel bag over his right shoulder, and a smaller bag in his left hand.

The signal company was falling into formation on the train platform when Colling stepped down from the car, and he made his way around the milling soldiers, looking for a sign that would direct him to the military transport office.

As Colling made his way along the platform, he saw that there were two large warehouses across the tracks, and the remnants of a rail yard behind the stationhouse. He guessed that the principal railway stations closer to the city center were no doubt flattened, and this outlying station was serving as the Army's terminal for the city. Behind him, he could hear the shouted commands of the signal company officers marching off their troops as he opened the door marked "Transportation Office."

A technical sergeant with a bored expression on his face was engrossed in his work at a desk behind the high ticket counter. Something or someone had ripped off the barrier that had been on top of the counter, so that where normally there would have been two or three barred ticket windows, there was now only a flat surface. Colling could see a pink-faced second lieutenant at his own desk, set further back from the counter. Colling eased the weight of his duffel bag to the floor.

"Sergeant, can you tell me when the next train to the 61st Division will be leaving?"

Without looking up from his work, the technical sergeant answered, "No train to the 61st until day after tomorrow. If you want to go to Munich first, you can go tomorrow noon time, but you might not be able to make connections from there back to division headquarters at Landsgau."

"What about billeting, Sergeant?"

"Closest is at Camp Chesterfield. That's about three miles that way," the transportation sergeant said, motioning over his shoulder towards the rail yard. "There ain't no motor transport running this time of day, so you'll have to hoof it. Or you can sleep here, but the floor is the best we can offer."

"I noticed a bench outside, can I sack out there?"

"Yeah, I guess, but there's four more trains due through here tonight, so you won't have much peace and quiet."

"Any place I can mail a letter, Sarge?"

"Yeah, drop it in that wire tray at the end of the counter," he said, still not looking up from his work.

Colling tossed the letter into the tray, which was labeled "Mail," hefted his duffel and stepped outside onto the now-deserted platform. In the fading evening light, he observed the open doors of a warehouse on the other side of the tracks from where he stood. The warehouse was well lit, and through the high open freight doors he could see a soldier working at a desk. Colling climbed down from the platform and picked his way across the tracks to the building opposite. He had to throw his bags up onto the loading dock and then boost himself up. His luggage in hand, he walked up to the man at the desk. Closer up, he could see that he had corporal's stripes. He was also the first Negro soldier that Colling had ever seen. He didn't look up from the stack of papers in front of him as Colling approached.

"Hi, Corporal. Any chance I can sack out on top of one of those crates over there?" Colling asked, pointing to a stack of wooden boxes.

"Well, sir, I guess you could do that. Makes no mind to me. But it might be better for you to use that cot over there instead. It be a might more comfortable."

Colling followed the corporal's gaze, and saw that an area had been curtained off, and several folding cots had been set up. Colling thanked him and carried his gear over. "Does it make any difference which one I take?" he asked.

"Take the one farthest to the back. The others is my crew's."

Colling dropped his bags at the foot of the cot that the corporal had indicated. He took off his jacket, and was about to lie down, when he realized he had not eaten since breakfast. "Is there a mess hall near here?"

“Onliest one for white troops is over to Camp Chesterfield.”

“That’s pretty far away.”

“Yep. And probably not serving now anyway. But we got our own rations here. If you wants to scrounge, you might find somepin’ to eat over there,” replied the corporal, pointing to another curtained area half-hidden behind a stack of boxes.

When Colling pulled back the curtain, he saw that a makeshift kitchen had been arranged next to a tap projecting out of the wall over a stone sink, made up of an Army field refrigerator and two hot-plates resting on a table. “Should be some eggs and maybe some ham in the fridge,” called out the colored soldier. Colling discovered that he was correct. He found a frying pan and, in a few minutes, he was wolfing down four scrambled eggs and slices of fried ham. When he finished, he washed the dirty pan, plate and utensils.

“How do you guys get your rations?” he asked.

“Truck come from our battalion mess tent over to other side of the city once a week.”

“You guys sure seem isolated here.”

“Well, we is supposed to have a squad of ten or twelve men, but everybody is having to work unloading and loading over to the main depot. Only me and two others assigned here.”

Colling stepped over to stand beside the Negro. “Need any help?”

“I don’t reckon you know anything about filing, do you?”

“Sure. Just show me what you want, and I’d be happy to do it. By the way, Corporal, my name’s Jim Colling, what’s yours?”

The corporal hesitated a moment, then said, “Woodrow Blackshear.” Colling extended his hand, and they shook hands.

“Well, Corporal Blackshear, let’s get started. What do you need me to do?”

The corporal showed Colling several piles of papers. He explained that the two other men he was supposed to have help him had left on a three-day pass with the permission of their Quartermaster Company’s commanding officer, Captain Quincy. The captain was running the company because the first sergeant had returned to the States, and the closest other NCO, a staff sergeant, was at the supply depot six miles away. Captain Quincy was white, and disposed to be lenient to his colored enlisted men, and Blackshear was not pleased that he had given both his men passes at the same time.

Colling quickly grasped the filing method as the Negro explained it, and began working on the stack of papers. He worked steadily, distracted only by the trains that rattled in and out of the station through the night. It was nearly 22:00 when he pushed the last of the supply requisition forms into a file folder and placed it into a file cabinet. He was taking his first real break of the evening, drinking a cup of coffee that he had brewed in the makeshift kitchen, when the corporal spoke to him, “Don’t often see a white soldier willing to help out a colored soldier, Mr. Colling.”

“I’m not a ‘mister,’ Corporal. For crying out loud, you out-rank me.”

“Well, anyway, I wants to thank you.”

“My pleasure. After all, you’re giving me a place to sleep. And it looks like I’ll be here all day tomorrow, so if there’s anything else I can do, just let me know.”

“Does you know how to type?”

“Yep, and run a mimeograph machine, too.”

“Lord say! You must be heading to be a company clerk.”

“Nope. Just a rifleman. In basic training, I didn’t make a big deal of the fact I could type. My dad was in the First War, and he advised me never to volunteer for anything.”

Corporal Blackshear declared their work done for the day, and as he was pulling the warehouse doors shut and cutting off the lights, Colling undressed and slipped into his own cot.

The sound of the doors sliding open on their rollers the next morning woke him from a sound sleep. Blackshear greeted him cheerfully, “Good morning. The latrine is over to the back there. Krauts was pretty fancy. They’s a shower in there if you wants to clean up.”

The tiled shower did not have hot water, but the spray was welcome nevertheless. Colling dug out a clean shirt from his duffel bag, and sat down to eat the breakfast of eggs, bacon and toast that Blackshear had fixed for them. As they ate, the Negro corporal explained that the warehouse they were in was used to stock furniture



and miscellaneous items. The main supply depot he had mentioned the night before was located in a larger freight yard, and handled food, clothing and other materiel.

When Colling asked about gas and ammunition, Blackshear reminded him that the Ordnance Corps was responsible for those. Blackshear went on to describe how he was unable to transfer the information from the many requisitions that had been received to the manifest forms required to ship out the items. He figured he was about a week behind because he had to use the “hunt and peck” method of typing. He had been working on filling out the forms when Colling had arrived. Neither of Blackshear’s helpers could type either, but they would be able to pull the ordered items together for shipment, once the manifests were ready.

Colling told him that if he would show him what needed to be done, he would help him.

Colling quickly discovered that completing the forms was not particularly difficult. While his typing was not as skilled as a trained stenographer’s might have been, he was able to finish most of the manifests fairly quickly, especially if only one or two items had to be listed. For lengthier requisitions, producing the finished paperwork was a more burdensome task.

The arrival of the first train of the day interrupted his concentration, and he took the occasion to have another cup of coffee. He watched the usual flurry of activity as troops were unloaded and marched off to their destinations. It did not seem to Colling that any soldiers ever boarded a train, and he considered that the next day, he might be the first to do so. When the locomotive pulled out of the station, Colling noticed two figures standing on the platform. The two newly arrived soldiers seemed to be trying to figure out what they were going to do next, when Colling shouted over to them.

“You guys waiting for the train to the 61st?”

“Yeah,” replied one of them.

“If you don’t want to hike over to Camp Chesterfield, why don’t you come over here? We got a place to sleep, and food.”

The two men clambered down from the platform and crossed the tracks carrying their duffel bags. Colling gave each of them a hand up onto the warehouse loading dock. He asked, “What outfit in the 61st are you guys headed for?”

The taller of the men responded, “Sixty-first Quartermaster Battalion,” as he offered his hand to Colling. “I’m Jim Hendricks, and this is Wally Prentice.”

“My pleasure,” said Colling, introducing himself and Corporal Blackshear. The two soldiers seemed surprised to see the Negro, and Colling thought it best to keep the conversation moving. He explained that he had been helping Blackshear with his paperwork, and that he would greatly appreciate Hendricks’ and Prentice’s assistance, since they were probably more familiar with quartermaster procedure and forms than he was.

Hendricks walked over to the typewriter that Colling had been using, and examined the form that was still rolled into it. He commented, “Looks to me like you’re doing okay. A couple of overstrikes, but most supply sergeants overlook those.”

Colling offered the two men coffee, which they gratefully accepted. As they drank, Colling spoke quietly, seeming to want to keep their conversation from the Negro corporal, who was stacking crates as he assembled an order. “This colored guy has been real nice to me, guys. There’s cots here, a shower, and he’s got a kitchen where we can fix our own food. It was a lot better for me than walking all the way to Camp Chesterfield. He’s really not a bad guy, and he needs help. I don’t know how you feel about it, but I would appreciate it a lot if you could give us a hand.”

“Hell, Jim,” Hendricks said to Colling, “We ain’t got nothing against coloreds. If this setup is as good as you say, I got no objection to doing what we can. It’s better than hanging around over at that train station.” Prentice nodded his agreement and the two men asked what they could do to help.

As the day progressed, the two quartermaster soldiers took over the typing, and Colling and Blackshear worked at pulling together each of the orders and separating them for shipment. Some of the containers were heavy, and as Colling worked up a sweat, he stripped off his shirt and worked in his undershirt.

At one point, Colling noticed several large wooden crates with the name “Peerless Products” stenciled on them. He mentioned to Blackshear that his father’s drug store had had a Peerless fountain, and asked what military equipment that Peerless was making for the Army. Blackshear laughed, “Same thing, Mr. Colling. Those is soda fountains, would you believe.” Colling voiced his amazement, and Blackshear explained that the

crates contained six complete soda fountains. None of them had been requisitioned yet, and Blackshear doubted that anyone even knew they existed.

Corporal Blackshear took time to prepare lunch and then dinner for them as the day went by, and he proved to be skillful in converting simple Army rations into meals for which the three white soldiers praised him enthusiastically.

As night fell, all the paperwork had been completed, and the last of the orders had been filled. Before Blackshear shut the warehouse doors for the night, Colling crossed to the train depot and confirmed that the train to the 61st would leave at about 10:00 the next morning. When he returned, he copied the warehouse telephone number onto a slip of paper and put it into his wallet.

Surprisingly, their train arrived early, and Colling and the two quartermaster men had to hurry across the tracks to board. Blackshear had expressed his thanks many times as they prepared to depart, and as they left, handed each of them a paper sack which, they later discovered, held a ham sandwich.

They found a compartment with three empty seats, joining three middle-aged German civilians, two women and a man. Colling had supposed that the train was exclusively for allied military personnel, and he asked the man politely in German how they came to be travelling. He and his female companions were obviously taken aback when Colling addressed his question in their native language, but the man, after introducing himself as Doctor Kindlebergen, explained that they were returning to Munich to resume his prewar practice. What the physician referred to as the "Old Government" had conscripted him and the two women, his wife and her sister, both nurses, to work in a military hospital in Karlsruhe. They had recently been released from that service, and were now going home. For the benefit of Hendricks and Prentice, Colling relayed the three civilians' situation to the two soldiers. He had the impression that the other two soldiers felt uneasy in the presence of the Germans, who seemed to reciprocate the feeling. As a result, after his initial attempt to initiate an on-going conversation, he thought better of continuing to do so; the six occupants of the compartment kept quietly to themselves as the train rattled southward towards their destination.

As the conductor announced that they were arriving in Ulm, a technical sergeant passed the door to their compartment, and paused long enough to tell them that the Japanese surrender had been signed in Tokyo Bay. Colling translated for the German doctor and the two women, and added, "The war is finally over. Der Krieg zuletzt ist beendet."

The three Germans remained on the train to Munich, while Colling and his two fellow soldiers were directed to another platform where they would make connections to the 61st Division area. After a short wait in Ulm, they boarded a half-filled four-car day coach train that chugged slowly out of the city's Bahnhof. Four hours later, their impending arrival in 61st Division territory was signaled by a first lieutenant and a corporal with Transportation Corps armbands coming down the aisle of the car, asking to see everyone's travel orders.

While the corporal inspected the papers of the German passengers, the transport lieutenant directed his attention to the military personnel on board. He came to Hendricks and Prentice, and after reading their orders, informed them that the 61st Quartermaster Battalion was in Landsgau. They would have to stay on the train for about an hour more. When the officer read Colling's orders, he told him, "Grabensheim's where you get off, Private. The 40th is headquartered in Kummersfeld, which is about 40 kilometers south, and this train doesn't go there. The station master can direct you to transportation to regimental HQ."

The Grabensheim railway station and the surrounding yards displayed no discernible war damage. The station itself was a plain stucco building of a yellowish color which Colling took to be the result of years of locomotive exhaust. Its roof extended over the platform and provided cover on the other three sides of the structure. Inside, Colling inquired in German at one of two barred ticket windows where he might find the station-master. The clerk pointed to a door with a frosted glass window in it. Freshly painted black lettering on the glass said, "Transportation Office, U.S. Army."

The office was furnished with four desks, at one of which a sergeant sat typing. Colling pulled out his orders and announced that he was assigned to the 40th Infantry. The sergeant quickly scanned the sheet of paper and said, "The 40th is headquartered in Kummersfeld, about 40 clicks down the road. Normally, I would tell you to catch somebody headed that way, but it's too late in the day. But...if you go out of the station and cross the square, you'll see a street, it's marked 'Friedrichstrasse,' and if you go up that street, you'll see a kaserne, a barracks; and that's the headquarters of the first battalion of the 40th. They can put you up for the night, and you can get a ride to Regiment at Kummersfeld tomorrow."

Colling thanked the transportation sergeant and, folding his orders into the inside pocket of his jacket, hoisted his duffel bag onto his shoulder and walked out of the front entrance of the railway station and onto the Grabensheim Bahnhofplatz. Two American military policemen stood talking beside the door. They glanced at Colling, but then ignored him as he strode across the cobble-stones of the square and around the ornate octagonal fountain in its center. Most of the few civilians who were on the streets averted their eyes as Colling passed, but two small blond-haired children, hand-in-hand with their mother, stared at him as he walked by, and he greeted them in German. Their wide-eyed replies were cut off as they were tugged away down the street.

Friedrichstrasse led uphill away from the square, and Colling was breathing heavily when the kaserne came into view. It was a large three-story affair, its entrance gateway flanked by twin round towers with conical roofs. He looked up to see on its high front walls larger-than-life faded full-color paintings of two eighteenth-century German soldiers in resplendent uniforms. Under each of them were inscriptions in ornate scrolls, indicating that the kaserne was at one time home to the 27th Bavarian Regiment of Fusiliers.

Colling stepped into the vaulted tunnel that served as the kaserne's main entryway. For some reason he had expected to find sentries outside, but there were none. His eyes had not fully adjusted to the darkness of the tunnel when he was surprised by a voice speaking from a window to his right, asking him what he wanted. He turned to see an American soldier staring at him through glass from which a semicircle had been removed at the bottom. Colling produced his orders and shoved them through the opening. The guard, who Colling could now see, was a private first class, looked at the papers and pushed them back to Colling. "Over to your right is the battalion HQ," said the PFC, "Take these over there. See Sergeant Ferguson."

As Colling walked out of the entrance tunnel, its cobble-stone pavement gave way to a gravel driveway that ran along each side of an open square surrounded by the four walls of the kaserne. In the center of the square, in an open grassy rectangle, stood a flagpole from which hung a limp American flag. Keeping to the gravel, Colling followed the directions given by the PFC and headed towards a pair of double doors surmounted by a plain black-on-white sign reading "Headquarters, 1st Bn., 40th U.S. Infantry." As he took in his surroundings, Colling noticed that there appeared to be bomb or artillery damage to the two upper floors of the portion of the barracks on the side of the square opposite the headquarters, and to the roof of the building in front of him.

He climbed the steps to the double doors under the headquarters sign and quietly let himself in. The entrance opened into a wide wooden-floored hallway. Two American soldiers in fatigues were on their hands and knees at the far end, polishing the floor. They looked up as Colling entered, and one said, "Hey, buddy, look out! Don't scuff up the wax."

Colling apologized and began stepping carefully as he searched for an office. The same soldier who had warned him pointed to a door on Colling's left and told him, "The battalion orderly room is in there."

Master Sergeant Jeffrey Ferguson sat behind a desk to which was tacked a placard with his name and rank on it. He was leaning back in his chair, his feet on the desk, smoking a cigar. He straightened up as Colling walked in. Colling estimated the sergeant to be in his mid-forties, and Colling guessed that Ferguson had been in the Army for a long time.

Colling snapped to attention in front of the desk. "Private James Colling reporting, Sergeant. I have orders for the 40th Infantry," he said, handing his orders to Ferguson.

Ferguson read while Colling stood stiffly. The sergeant made no comment as he scanned the papers. Finally, he said, "Stand at ease, Private. Now ordinarily, I would send you up to Regiment, and let them figure out what battalion they would assign you to. But I expect that over the next couple of months, I will have to watch the good part of this battalion ship out for the States, and I would also expect that replacements will not be something I can look forward to getting. As a result, Private, I am going to keep you here. You are henceforth a member of the Headquarters of the First Battalion. I am supposed to have eighty-four men, and I presently have less than sixty, most of whom will no doubt receive their discharge orders next week, and head happily back State-side."

Stepping past Colling to the door, Ferguson shouted, "Carley, come in here, on the double!"

One of the men who had been waxing the floor appeared at the door as Ferguson stepped back behind his desk.

"Take Colling here and show him where to bunk. Put him with D Company. Get Sergeant Chambers to sign him out his field gear and a rifle. And Colling, once you've got your stuff unpacked, report back here. Don't waste any time."

Carley led Colling out into the square, and once outside, he turned and offered his hand.

"Bill Carley," he said.

"Jim Colling," replied Colling.

"You been in long?" asked Carley, as they headed towards the building opposite the entrance to the kaserne.

"Since June. I figured I'd be in on Japan."

"Lucky for you they dropped the bomb on the little yellow bastards."

"How about you? How long you been with the 40th?"

"A little over a year now. I was a replacement just before the Hurt-gen."

"You mean the Hürtgen Forest?"

"Yeah."

"I hear that was pretty rough."

"It wasn't easy," said Carley without elaboration, as they reached the steps leading up to another set of double doors. Carley pointed out the mess hall and day room as they walked down the wide hallway, which was lined by windows opening onto the central parade ground. They reached a broad staircase, and Carley ran quickly up, Colling struggling to match his speed, encumbered by his bags. From the second floor hallway that duplicated the one below, Carley gestured Colling into a barracks room. Pointing to one of the double bunks, he advised, "You can dump your stuff on that one there. That wall locker there is yours."

Colling dropped his duffel onto the bed, and Carley urged, "Come on. We need to get down to the supply room to get your field gear."

Leading Colling back to the first floor, Carley directed him through a door stating it led to the supply room, where they found a slightly overweight and balding staff sergeant and two younger soldiers sitting behind a long counter of dark polished wood. Shelves loaded with various items of military hardware filled the room behind the counter. Carley spoke, "Sergeant Morton, this here is Colling. Sergeant Ferguson's put him in the HQ, and wants him to check out his field gear."

Staff Sergeant Morton stepped to the counter and looked Colling over. "Fresh meat, huh?" he said as his two companions grinned. Morton pulled a clipboard from beneath the counter, and removing a form from it, asked Colling to fill it out. It asked for Colling's name, rank and serial number, and date of service. As Colling started writing, one of the other soldiers had begun removing items from the shelves and piling them on the counter, where Sergeant Morton sorted them out. Colling hesitated and stopped filling in blanks when he came to the body of the form, which consisted of a list of equipment, and Morton, without looking up, said, "I'll fill in the rest of it." He took the sheet of paper from Colling and placed it on the clipboard; then, as he pointed to or touched each piece of equipment in turn, he checked off the appropriate box, reading each line item aloud. One of his assistants, a private first class, repeated the process as the supply sergeant went through his ritual. When they were finished, they pushed the olive-drab pile towards Colling. "Sign here," said Morton, offering the clipboard. After Colling scribbled his name at the place where the sergeant pointed, Morton said, "Welcome to the 40th, Private."

Without offering to carry anything, Carley led the way back to the second-floor barracks room. Colling sorted out the helmet and liner, webbing, field pack, canteen, and bayonet onto his bunk. Carley interrupted, "We got to get Sergeant Delonzo to check you out an M-1."

They returned to the first floor, where Carley led him through the mess hall and out into a yard at its rear. Across the yard was what apparently had been a large stable that had been converted into a garage. Two-and-a-half- and three-quarter-ton trucks and jeeps were parked in a line to one side. Colling could hear the clanging sounds of someone working on machinery emanating from the doors of the garage.

They were greeted by a tall lanky corporal as they approached. "What you doin' back here, Carley? Ferguson send you to clean the grease pit?"

"No, Snuffy. Ferguson wants Sergeant Delonzo to check a rifle out to Colling here."

The corporal offered Colling a hand from which he had been wiping engine grime, and Colling took it. "I'm Henry Smith, but folks call me 'Snuffy.' Don't know exactly why," he said, grinning. "Must be 'cause I'm from Kentucky. Sergeant is in his office, Carley. I'm goin' to go get washed up before chow call."

Technical Sergeant Delonzo was at a desk in the glassed-in office located in one corner of the garage. The sergeant was irritated that Ferguson expected him to do the paperwork necessary to get Colling a rifle, muttering that that was the first sergeant's job, and besides, it was nearly time for supper, but he completed the

necessary form, and then conducted Colling back to his barracks room. Carley excused himself to go ask Ferguson if he could knock off work and eat.

When they reached the barracks bay, Delonzo showed Colling where his M-1 was located in the weapons rack in the aisle between the rows of double cots. The sergeant unlocked the bar securing the rifles, and handed one to Colling, telling him to confirm the serial number as he read it out. As Delonzo replaced the weapon and locked the bar, he told Colling to remember which one was his. "If and when you pull guard duty, you'll be issued ammo by the sergeant of the guard," he said, "And you'll have to account for every round when you come off duty. That means if you expend any rounds, you have to bring back the brass." Colling was surprised that there was the possibility of having to fire a rifle, now that the war was over, but he said only, "Yes, Sergeant," making a mental note to be sure and pick up any expended cartridge casings to be counted, if the need arose.

As Delonzo was leaving the barracks room, a group of soldiers had to step aside to let him pass so that they could enter. Most of them paid little attention to Colling, but several came over and introduced themselves, then hurriedly left for the mess hall. Colling, remembering Sergeant Ferguson's instructions, remained behind to unpack and arrange his equipment as he had been taught in basic training. When not sure of what to do with a particular item, he imitated how others had set up things. When he finished, he changed into fatigues and reported to the battalion office.

Sergeant Ferguson was not in his office. An acne-faced corporal manned a desk just inside the door. Colling informed him that Sergeant Ferguson had told him to report back after drawing his equipment and weapon. The corporal went back to reading his comic book, saying, "Ferguson's gone to eat. He won't be back, probably, so if I was you, I'd go eat, and come back in the A.M."

As Colling started to leave, the corporal added, "And you'd better change. No fatigues allowed in the mess hall. And by the way, Sergeant Ferguson left these for you," he said, tossing Colling a half-dozen 61st Division patches secured by a rubber band.

The mess hall served beef stew, which some of the other men told Colling was not unusual. It appeared that the food was good but monotonous: the First Battalion was reputed to have a comparatively good mess hall. After eating, a number of the men left to get into their field gear, draw weapons, and report for guard duty.

Colling returned to the barrack-room, where he began sewing the blue and white 61st Division patches onto his uniforms. He had completed one shirt and his jacket, doing a passable job but one that would have displeased his mother, when Carley invited Colling to the day room to meet some of the other men. The day room, which in Army logic could not be used by the troops during the day, was furnished with two over-stuffed couches and several easy chairs, as well as a few tables, all occupied by card players. Carley introduced Colling to several of the men, and when invited to join a poker game in progress, asked Colling if he wanted to play. Declining the invitation from the card players with the excuse that he was broke, Colling took a place on one of the couches, picking up a tattered month-old copy of Stars and Stripes.

Before he had a chance to look at the newspaper, two PFCs approached him. The taller and thinner of the two introduced himself as Al Langenstreet, and turning to the other man, said, "And this is David McGee, better known as 'Fibber.'"

McGee did not seem pleased with the nickname, "Yeah, Al, and my girl friend's name is Molly." Colling responded that they could call him Jim, glad that his last name was not similar to that of some radio or movie personality.

Langenstreet dropped onto the couch, while McGee pulled one of the large easy chairs closer, and once seated, asked, "We got a kind of a survey going here, and since you're new, and you just came from the States, and you probably seen all the latest movies, so we wanted to ask...who is your favorite female movie star? So far, most of the guys say Betty Grable. Personally, I think Ginger Rogers is tops, but Dave here disagrees, he says it's that new gal, Laura Bacall."

"Lau-ren Bacall," corrected McGee. "They say she's only eighteen, but did you see how she handled Bogart in *To Have and Have Not*? We just saw it last week over to Regiment. She is the kind of hand-full I'd like to handle." Because McGee was short and stocky, had a prematurely receding hairline and wore glasses, Colling hoped that McGee was not optimistic about his wishes being fulfilled.

Colling offered his opinion; "I kind of like Katharine Hepburn."

Langenstreet scoffed, "Too stuck up. Too much of a society dame." McGee nodded his head in agreement.

Colling defended his position, "Did you guys see Bringing Up Baby? She wasn't stuck up in that one."

"That was because of Cary Grant," replied Langenstreet, "He made the movie funny, and she had to go along with the gag. In fact, that was what made it funny...she was a society dame, and she was chasing around after that dog and running after that tiger and all."

"Leopard," corrected McGee.

"Well, guys, I have to stick with my opinion. I don't mind a classy woman. Could I ask you guys a question?"

"Sure," said Langenstreet, and McGee echoed him.

"There doesn't seem to be enough guys here to be a whole battalion. Where is everybody?"

Langenstreet took on an air of authority, "Only D Company and the headquarters are housed here in this kaserne. Company A is out pulling security duty at what is known as Camp 146, the POW/DP camp north of here. They got German POW's and the DP's,...former slave workers, some of them are women and children, out there. They got to hold the Krauts and the DPs in separate compounds; otherwise they'd kill each other. It ain't no picnic, I'm telling you. AMGOT, that's 'American Military Government,' is in charge of the camp."

He explained that the camp had been used as a POW camp for allied prisoners by the Germans, but they had all been released and sent home right after it was liberated by 61st Division troops. Now the tables were turned and there were Germans on the inside of the wire. He added that the Germans remained imprisoned because of suspected or actual Nazi ties, while the workers were officially classified as "Displaced Persons," awaiting repatriation. Both Langenstreet and McGee had been to the camp, and offered their opinion that it was necessary that the DPs be kept confined because there was a well-founded belief that they would take revenge on the German civilian populace if allowed to roam at large.

McGee offered, "If a German turns out to be an SS officer or high up in the Nazi Party, he goes straight to prison in Munich, and most likely will get tried as a war criminal. But if they decide he's only an enlisted man, they usually turn him loose, but not always. All the SS got tattoos on their arms, so they have to sort out the EM from the officers."

He went on to explain that the DPs were interviewed and prepared for return to their native countries. That had been easy for those from countries like France and Belgium, and even Greece and Italy, but many of the ones from Poland and Yugoslavia were not enthusiastic about returning home. As a result, they were not forthcoming about exactly where they had resided before the Germans put them to forced labor.

Colling asked about the other companies in the battalion, and Langenstreet went on, "B Company is guarding a hydro-electric dam about thirty kilometers to the northwest. The place was fortified when we took it, so those guys spend their time sitting behind machine guns in sand-bagged bunkers, which is not the way I would want to spend my time."

He added that quarters at the dam were not bad, since they consisted of barracks built for the Luftwaffe anti-aircraft outfit that had been stationed there. The modern concrete buildings had been taken intact, and were, in his opinion, better than the kaserne that housed D Company.

"And what about C Company?" asked Colling.

"Oh, Jesus," said Langenstreet. "They got the worst duty of all. They're out in tents near Niessen. That's about fifty clicks northeast of here." The job of C Company was to guard several bridges and tunnels along the railroad and highways leading from the north and east. As a result, the company was scattered out over a wide area, housed in small clusters of tents at several locations. Their food had to be trucked to them, and there was little change from living conditions in the battlefield. The only real difference was that there was no one shooting at them. At least not very often.

The two soldiers assured Colling that their own quarters here in Grabensheim were comfortable by comparison, except that half the kaserne was uninhabitable because of the bomb damage Colling had noticed when he arrived. Ironically, the place had not been a target. Someone had loosed a stick of bombs by mistake in the last couple of days of the war. Fortunately, the bombs had not scored a direct hit, but had exploded along the street paralleling one side of the barracks, taking off the top story on that part of the building.

D Company's assignment was to provide sentries for the rail yards in Grabensheim, and the rail and road bridges north and south of the town. The rail yards were home to the piles of coal that would be the major source of fuel supply during the coming winter, and D Company's job was to interfere routinely with the Germans' routine attempts to pilfer from it.

That led to a discussion regarding the barter economy that prevailed in Germany. When McGee told him that cigarettes were prized more than currency, Colling replied that he had read about that in Time magazine, and had actually got a sailor to buy him two packs of Lucky's from Ship's Stores before he left his troop transport in Antwerp, even though he did not smoke.

McGee advised, "If you want, Jim, since you don't smoke, you can sell me your cigarette ration every month, no trouble at all." Colling told him that he had not yet been issued a card, and Langenstreet and McGee assured him he would get one from Ferguson.

A group of men wearing field gear with slung rifles trooped by in the hallway, causing Langenstreet to comment that D Company was still lucky that its men were able to return by truck to the kaserne when not at their guard posts. Colling interrupted to ask whether the Germans had surrendered the kaserne when the 40th arrived. Langenstreet answered that the place had been deserted. It was believed that it had been used as a training facility, and had been pretty much abandoned in the closing days of the war. The Americans had just walked in and taken over.

The day room had become hazy with cigarette smoke, and Colling felt the need for some fresh air, and then realized that his day had begun many hours ago. Langenstreet and McGee had begun to argue about whether the kaserne had been used by the SS or not when Colling interrupted, "Sorry, guys, I'm bushed. I think I'm going to head for the sack."

McGee responded, "Breakfast is from 05:00 to 06:00. Formation's at 07:00."

Colling thanked him and told both men good night.

## **Chapter Two**

September-October, 1945

The morning formation was not a lengthy affair. A first sergeant whose name Colling had not been told called the troops to attention, then stood them at ease. He proceeded to read off the names of squads and sections with their assignments for the day. From the quiet groans, Colling was able to guess which were the least favorable. Colling's name was not called, and he concluded he should just report to Sergeant Ferguson. The formation ended with a brief lecture concerning the anti-fraternization regulations, with a reminder that it was a court-martial offense to become friendly with the German population, especially the female part. The first sergeant glared when there were snickers from the ranks, but finished his monologue as required. The men were called back to attention, then dismissed.

Colling had changed into fatigues immediately after breakfast, and when the assembly was dismissed, he went straight to Ferguson's office. The same corporal who had been there the evening before was sweeping the floor. He looked up as Colling entered, "Sergeant's not here yet.

Have a seat over there." Colling took one of the four chairs set against the wall. He sat quietly, cap in hand, for a few moments, then offered, "Anything I can help you with?"

The corporal hesitated, "Yeah, I guess so. Take this cloth and dust everything that don't move."

Colling was dusting the top of a file cabinet when Ferguson strolled into the office. The sergeant frowned when he saw Colling had been put to work doing what was supposed to be the corporal's responsibility. "Found a helper, Hughes?" Ferguson said to the corporal. Hughes straightened quickly and replied, "Yes, Sergeant."

"Well, that's just ducky, Corporal. You're relieved."

Corporal Hughes took his jacket and cap from a coat rack on the wall and hurriedly left the office. Ferguson turned to Colling, who had been standing quietly beside the file cabinet. As the Sergeant's gaze caught him, Colling stiffened to attention. "Private Colling reporting, Sergeant."

"I recall, Private, that you were supposed to report yesterday."

"Yes, Sergeant. When I finished getting my gear stowed, I came back here and the corporal who was just here, Corporal...?"

"Hughes," Ferguson completed Colling's sentence.

"Yessir. Corporal Hughes said you weren't here, and I should come back this morning."

There was silence for a few moments as Ferguson stared at him, and Colling considered it best to not be the first to speak.

“All right. You passed two jeeps parked outside.” Colling nodded his head. Ferguson continued, “You’ll find a bucket and rags in the latrine at the end of the hall. Wash the jeeps and when you’re done, report back here. Sorry, but there’s no soap.”

“Sergeant, can I have permission to go and see if I can get some soap over at the mess hall?”

“Okay. But I want to see you scrubbing those vehicles in short order.”

Colling assured the sergeant that he would take only a few minutes. He retrieved the bucket and rags from a locker in the latrine and carried them outside. He noticed a water spigot projecting from the wall close by, and tried the handle. Water gushed out. Leaving the pail beside the water tap, he hurried to the tunnel across the square that would take him to the rear of the mess hall.

Two Germans were hosing out garbage cans beside the door to the kitchen. They wore the blue smocks and loose trousers common to European laborers. One was wearing a hat that looked as if it would have been more at home on a bank clerk, while the other had a slouch cap pulled down to just above his eyes. Colling spoke to them in German, “Bitte, have you soap?”

The man with the hat seemed surprised, then answered, “Yes, over there,” pointing to two cakes of yellow Army soap lying on the steps.

“And perhaps another hose?” asked Colling.

“Not here. This is the only one.”

“You said, ‘Not here,’” said Colling. “Does that mean you could find for me a hose, for say, two cigarettes?”

The man in the slouch cap answered first, “For three cigarettes for each of us, I can get you a hose, but not so long.”

“I only need perhaps four or five meters.” Colling pulled a pack of Lucky Strikes from the pocket of his fatigue jacket. He extracted six cigarettes and held them up. “I need the hose right away. And a cake of the soap, too.”

With a gesture that he would return quickly, the German with the slouch cap trotted away through a gate opening onto the street next to the kaserne. Colling handed one of the cigarettes to the other German, who lit it immediately, and inhaled deeply with an expression of satisfaction on his face. He looked at Colling and gesturing with his cigarette, asked if he would join him. Colling replied that he did not smoke, and the German grinned and predicted that Colling would have many pleasant days in Germany, speaking the language, and being able to put his cigarette ration to many beneficial uses. Colling introduced himself and learned that the German’s name was Helmut Eisenschmit.

“And you do this work for the Army?” asked Colling.

“Yes. It’s good work. There are only four of us, to do all the ‘KP’ as you Americans say, but we get all the leftovers from the kitchen before anything is thrown away. Your mess sergeant is a good man.”

“Now I understand why I haven’t heard about KP duty,” responded Colling.

“Yes, Herr Colling. It is good for the Americans that you do not have to do ‘KP,’ good for me. Ach, here comes Rudi with your hose.”

Rudi came running up with a length of hose. It had been cut from a longer length, and only one end sported an attachment, and Colling noted with relief that it was a fitting that could be attached to the spigot. He turned over the other five cigarettes, picked up a cake of soap, and ran back to the jeeps.

He was rinsing off the second jeep when Ferguson came down the steps. “Where’d you find the hose?” asked the sergeant.

“Bought it off the German KP’s, Sergeant.”

“Hmm. How much?”

“Six cigarettes, Sergeant.”

Ferguson laughed. “Cooley had to give ‘em a full carton to get one for the mess hall. And they swore that it was the only hose left in town.”

“Helps to be able to talk to them in their own language, Sergeant.”

“You speak German?”

“I sure do, Sergeant. Learned it at my grandma’s knee.”

Ferguson considered for a moment. “I don’t suppose you can type.”

“Sure can, Sergeant,” said Colling, using a wet rag to wipe off the jeep’s rear wheel.

“When you finish up here, come inside.”



“Yes, Sergeant.”

Colling wiped the last moisture off the hood of the jeep and stood back to admire his work. Carley walked by, a mop over his shoulder. “Ferguson’ll have you washing Major Harris’ Kraut car next, Colling,” he said, without turning around.

“And you’ll still be swabbing floors, Bill,” responded Colling.

Colling drew to attention in front of Sergeant Ferguson’s desk. “Reporting, Sergeant.”

“You ever type a morning report, Colling?”

“No, Sergeant, but if you show me how, I can.”

Ferguson took Colling through a door into the next room. He pointed to a bespectacled corporal painfully typing at one of three desks that crowded the office. “This is Corporal Worth, Battalion Clerk. He’ll show you what to do. Worth, this is Private Colling. He says he knows how to type, so show him how to do the morning report. If he’s good enough, he’ll be here permanently.”

When Ferguson had returned to his own office, Worth informed Colling that the sergeant was an impossible task-master, and that he, Worth, was anxiously awaiting the day when he would receive his discharge orders, which should be any time now. The clerk showed Colling the morning reports, and how they were to be completed. Every man in the battalion headquarters detachment had to be listed, with his situation. Was he available for duty? On furlough? In the hospital? A.W.O.L.? Transferred or discharged? Everything had to be typed to perfection, and Colling could see from the number of incomplete discarded forms in the wastebasket that Worth had made several fresh starts in his efforts. Corporal Worth explained that once the roster for the headquarters detachment had been completed, each of the morning reports sent over from the battalion’s four company clerks had to be checked against the previous days’ for accuracy. Any discrepancies had to be called to Ferguson’s attention. The battalion adjutant, Lieutenant Averback, was on leave in Paris, as were most of the battalion’s officers. Only Major Harris, the battalion commanding officer, and the line officers in charge of the three companies that were located in their outlying assignments were present with their units. Worth offered his opinion that when those officers who were on leave did return, the others would depart on leave themselves, or receive their discharge orders. All of which meant that Ferguson as Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge was effectively running the battalion.

Even though Colling did not ask, Worth continued to provide a non-stop narrative about the battalion as Colling typed the report. Major Harris was shackled-up with the good-looking blonde wife of a Wehrmacht colonel who was missing on the Eastern Front, at the colonel’s mansion outside town. The battalion commanding officer only came to the kaserne a couple of times a week, driving the German colonel’s Mercedes. The Major did not seem to be taking the anti-fraternization rules seriously.

Colling found that, in spite of Worth’s continuing monologue, with a little concentration he was able to complete the required form with a fair degree of ease. He finally pulled the document out of the typewriter and handed it to the corporal, interrupting him in mid-sentence as he was describing Major Harris’ Kraut woman’s apparently considerable physical attributes. Worth looked over the report and looked up at Colling in amazement. “I usually take all morning to finish one of these. You done it in less than an hour.”

“Should we take it to the Sergeant,” asked Colling.

“If we do, he’ll find something else for us to do, and it might not have anything to do with working in the office.”

“I think we had better take that chance,” replied Colling. Worth told him he could do what he wanted, but he was going to stay at his desk.

Ferguson raised his eyebrows when Colling laid the morning report in front of him. The sergeant examined it carefully, and seeming to find no error or omission, told Colling he had done well. He then asked, “How much education you have, Colling?”

“It’s in my 201 file, Sergeant.”

“Your 201 hasn’t arrived yet.”

“Two years of college, Sergeant.”

“Why were you drafted? You had a deferment, didn’t you?”

“I did, Sergeant, but two of my best friends who signed up out of high school were killed in action. I thought it was time I took my share of responsibility.”

“I thought the Army stopped taking enlistments right after V-E day,” said Ferguson.

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