

1: Belvedere...Remembering

When he got a little itchy, carbine slung over his shoulder, its butt nestled against his hip, Captain William M. Shepard (“Shep”) would amble over to my foxhole. With a sort of sheepish grin he’d say, “Daneman, do you want to take a little walk?” Then he’d stand there, broad shouldered, flat bellied, his somber, icy gaze a fitting match to the ashen pallor his skin. Even weeks of spring skiing in the mountains that cradled Camp Hale, Colorado, and a summer of searing Texas sun at Camp Swift hadn’t tinted the ghostlike mantle he wore. Parodying a character straight out of *Dick Tracy*, he bore the appellation, “The Ghoul.” But only behind his back. You didn’t play name games with your company commander.

I’d cock my head for a second like I was pondering a choice. (As if my two stripes gave me an option against his two silver bars.) Mumbling, I’d reply, “Sure.” In truth, I’d have followed him to the end of the earth. His calm, no bullshit demeanor had earned my total respect. So off we’d go, not really looking for trouble, but headed for one of our outposts high in the Italian Appenines. Even during lulls in the fighting, some of our little walks led to harrowing nightmares.

The first nightmare was on a February night in 1945 on the bare saddle between Mount Belvedere and Mount Gorgolesco, somewhere north of Florence. It must have been near midnight when we started across the slopes, diligently trying to be silent. Darkness falls deeply in the Italian winter. The huge anti-aircraft spotlights ranging along peaks to our south sent their beams bouncing off the winter haze, creating the artificial moonlight by which we made our way.

Neither of us spoke. Only the rustle of our gear and the squeaky crunch of our mountain boots penetrating the frozen shell on the snow broke the silence. We stole through the trees just under the undulating crest of the tree line, wary of bypassed Krauts or their probing patrols. They still held the lower reaches north and west of the peaks, and a wrong turn would put us in their midst. With only a sidelong glance, we passed some of the anonymous dead, sprawled grotesquely, silhouetted against the snow.

Finally, beyond the ruins of a tiny mountain church, Cappel di Ronchidas, on a ridge of towering chestnut trees, we stumbled on a cluster of foxholes. Muffled voices answered our password, and whispered directions sent us further into the defense perimeter to the log-covered dugout which sheltered the 2nd Battalion’s advance command post. Inside, by the flickering yellow beams of a candle, we found Lieutenant Colonel S. huddled over a map.

Suddenly the shelling, which had been intermittent, intensified.

The Germans were zeroed in on the dugout they had built and correctly surmised that we would also use. A relentless rain of shells split the earth. The ground trembled, and granules from the rent sandbags poured between the logs that formed the ceiling. The noise was painful, ear-shattering; even hands cupped over the ears could not relieve the pain of concussion.

Outside, the men who cowered in frantically dug foxholes began taking hits from overhead artillery and mortar tree-bursts. The illusionary shelter of the chestnuts instead became an umbrella of death. I worried about Johnny and Ned, my close friends who had been dispatched to an observation outpost somewhere nearby.

Some of the wounded who could still crawl headed for the dugout and soon it was crammed with men. *This isn’t for me*, I thought. One lucky direct hit would have collapsed the

roof and annihilated all of us. I searched for Shep, but in the sea of helmets, I couldn't pick him out. Crawling over and under the seething bodies, I slowly squeezed to the exit.

During a brief lull in the shelling, I dashed from the dugout and toward a narrow, windswept gulley outlined by a snow-covered clearing. The crescendo of crashing shell bursts persisted as I dove into the shallow trench. For what seemed like hours I pressed my face and body into the cold snow, not daring to move. Shrieking chunks of shrapnel tore through the air inches over my head, slashing huge holes in the tree trunks and sending them crashing to the ground. Nearby, pain-filled cries of "Medic" and "Mama" punctuated the screams of the wounded.

From somewhere along the ridge came a cry that ricocheted from the peaks: "*HERE THEY COME!!!*"