

STEVEN M. WEBB

you take it, you hold it," he'd been told. At first he held out the paper to burn in single sheets, naming Red Tab commanders one at a time, but then just threw the lot into a flaming heap. The fetid, low-ceilinged cave filled with smoke, so he fanned the flames with a piece of wood, shouting into the deafening roar of the now continuous shelling, in anger and grief for the men who'd been wasted, and the wounded who'd have to be left behind. "Burn, you Red Tab bastards! Have a *mind!*"

The ear-shattering barrage began to lift from the line. Pushing aside the soggy blanket, he looked outside at the curling, lingering smoke still in the trench, his eardrums bursting with a ringing pressure. The accumulation of sweat and grime around his eyelids and under his stubbled jaw made his face feel like a clay mask. Ten yards down the line to the right the sentry was Pelham, face up, eight days of dirty stubble lit up by German flares, his muddy, stocky body lying against the parados, partly upright in eighteen inches of stinking muck. He was alive, without a rifle, snoring like a pig, a gesture to the chain of command.

Forty-eight hours without sleep, he thought, wading toward Pelham. The spiraling whistle of shells returned without warning, timed to catch those who assumed it was all-clear. *Bloody* hell. Molten shrapnel and super-heated mud smacked and sizzled as the fragments hit the water near him. A zinger ricocheted off his helmet, before the concussion blew him against the parados. The trench, once more than fifteen-feet deep, had been partially refilled with earth thrown up by the 56<sup>th</sup> Division's own shelling. Cold, dark immersion awaited the unwary, over their head in slime, wherever the trench had filled to its original depth with rainwater. A few feet away Pelham snored on, concussed or exhausted, as ineffective as one of the mangled corpses in the black heaps above. *Stay put. Wait. Wait it out.*

The shelling shifted, and lit up the wasteland just to the rear. Perhaps C Company had been spotted coming up in support, along the flooded ditch that meandered across this morning's No Man's Land. If no support units were being targeted, the barrage would be blocking his own line of withdrawal, pinning the company in place. Huns would be moving to counter-assault the line at any moment, while Pelham and God knows who else, made themselves comfortable.

## SIAM: A VOYAGE

“Pelham!” he screamed, shaking the deafened, semi-conscious man, pushing a German rifle into his hands and gesturing at the magazine. “Find Mauser clips!”

Pushing through the mud to the next firebay, he expected to find a second lieutenant or a sergeant with one of the sentries. Alone, he clambered up a muddy slope onto a shell-gouged section of the parapet, peering out between a gap in the bodies. In the light of the next shell-burst he could see a dark mass of Germans flanking them three-hundred yards away to the north. Unseen Huns would be much closer, crawling from one shell-hole to another. Machine gun bullets ripped muddy lumps off the bodies in front of him, as he slid down toward a water-filled crater to gather his thoughts.

The surviving lieutenants and NCO's had to be notified. The company would not surrender. They would pull back under the same wire that crossed the flooded ditch. Wherever possible, wounded would be carried.

Another pall of smoke from the renewed shelling drifted back toward the trench, completely obscuring the night sky. Sentries were yelling from further up the line, “They're coming! They're coming!”

Leaving the fumes and sheltering depth of the crater, he scrambled toward the threat, vaulting over the wreckage of a shelled dugout. Faster, he leaped from one slippery fire-step to another, jumping over a stretch of deep water, until he heard, then saw a sergeant raging through the slop, coshing dark shapes sleeping in hollows under the parapet, screaming into the strobing light and the bedlam of the shells, “Stand to, or Fritz'll have yer! Get on the step! Get *up!*”

Rifle muzzles flashed as sentries opened up on the silhouettes of approaching Germans. He shouted to the sergeant, but his voice was lost in the overwhelming staccato of .303's on rapid fire. Cars and several trucks began honking behind him, and then someone knocked on the passenger-side window. Leon gasped and gripped the sides of his seat. Drive, drive, he thought, but couldn't remember how to use the pedals, or how to shift gears. Sweating, panting, he waved one arm to the drivers behind, and with a surge of adrenaline, pulse beating in his ears, he stabbed at the clutch, savaged a gear, and lurched into the intersection. Midway across, the lights changed and he panicked, found the brake pedal and stopped in the center lane, unsure which direction to take on

STEVEN M. WEBB

streets he'd forgotten. Cars honked from behind, and from the side. He shifted gears, let the clutch out too quickly, smoked the tires, and squealed through the red light and approaching traffic.

There was almost no feeling in his hands and feet when he steered to the side of the road to wipe the sweat out of his eyes and breathe. Each trembling in-breath reeked of clutch and new asphalt. Something in the stench of burned clutch plate reminded him of chalky earth, superheated by high explosives. The odor of new asphalt helped him to recognize Banner Street, though from a perspective he'd never experienced before, as if he were new to the town, approaching it from a trench at night. The shouting lingered, the muzzle flashes sharp, familiar.

*Good God*, he thought, *what did I see? Why would I see this, when I've never...*

As if in answer, a wave of hopelessness swept through him, then convulsions as his lungs gasped for air, his own voice involuntarily crying out for something he'd felt and seen in a daydream. There were people walking by on the sidewalk, looking in. His hand, gripped tight around the gearshift, shook without ceasing. He'd been on his way to an event for the mayor, he remembered. *You are the planner*. Deliberately he recalled the sequence of downtown intersections, pulled back out onto Banner Street, and sweated the four blocks to City Hall.

Leon parked in a far corner of the crowded City Hall lot, away from people and curious comments. Pressing his head against the headrest, he reached for any important thought, anything to exclude or explain what he'd just seen, felt, heard and smelled. No reassuring explanation came to mind. His frightened breathing seemed to echo in the truck cab, and there in the distorted distance, still holding the steering wheel, two shaking hands acting independently of his will. Odors of black water, drying blood and scorched earth would not leave his nostrils. The visor mirror showed Leon his nose was clean, but his eyes were red and staring. How could he look into others' faces in just a few minutes, speak about industry, and share the praise for Jim House?

Making himself look around through the glare of sunlight mirrored off rows of car windshields, Leon noticed the mayor's freshly cleaned, dark green Suburban parked in a reserved space, next to the front entrance. The reception was