

2<sup>nd</sup> place

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## THE LIEUTENANT'S RED BOOK

When Fritz woke up on October 7 his ears and face felt frozen. With the heavy frost, his mustache and beard crunched with ice crystals. He hadn't removed his boots for weeks.

He wasn't the only one miserable. Two weeks ago, if his timing was right, the decimated 4<sup>th</sup> Company hooked up with the tattered remains of his own regiment, the 7<sup>th</sup> Bavarian Sappers, in the Argonne woods. They found the 120<sup>th</sup> Landwehr Infantry headquarters finally, but yesterday the regiment had run into an ambush and force marched all night. Now they slept like dead men.

Fritz was an eighteen year old private in this God forsaken French countryside and everyday he wondered if he would see his home in Bavaria again. Getting into the Army was easy. He was given a choice of the Army or jail. The judge said the western front needed cannon fodder. What a price for grabbing sausages when the clerk's back was turned.

He could stay alive if he stayed back. When the bosses said move up, over the top of the trench shooting as you go, he stayed back. He wasn't the only one. Already some of the boys wanted to drop their belts. What could they do without pistols? The generals

seemed to take a personal interest in putting him in the way of a bayonet or bullet. His belt was staying put.

The supply kitchen brought rations the night before so some of the boys were boiling coffee. Before his unit found their headquarters, the soldiers survived by stealing chickens from Norman farms and, at one low point, they spit-roasted some rats. So coffee was good.

Fritz shook off the frost and gathered around the fire. One of the officers he recognized, Lieutenant Otto Kraus, was sitting under a nearby tree writing in a pocket sized red book. Fritz had seen Lieutenant Kraus almost daily with the red book. Most officers treated the privates like they were animals but Kraus was different. Once Fritz asked him what he wrote, bitte, expecting to hear him shout it was none of Fritz's business. Instead, Kraus told him pleasantly he kept a journal of the war and other things he wanted to remember.

Today, Fritz noticed the lieutenant appeared dejected as he wrote. An aide approached him with a summons from the general to come to headquarters. When Kraus rose, he stumbled and staggered before righting himself to military bearing.

Several cries rang out, "The Americans have broken through!" Fritz ran to his rifle, snapping on his pistol belt and snatching his bags. The unit hastily reported to headquarters only to be told the bitter fact that there were no reserves. They would have to march back to Schlossberg, the firing line where the assault regiment had suffered major casualties with soldiers captured.

Along the way, the unit passed artillery positions shot to bits, the men there in a state of chaos, and, in the open, on the North South Road, many 120<sup>th</sup> Landwehr soldiers

sprawled dead or wounded. Those men unhurt were so utterly exhausted they could not call for their rations from the field kitchen brought up during the night.

The regiment stopped to assess the terrible damage. Fritz was resting near a deep ravine when Lieutenant Kraus approached the steep incline. His face bore such deep sadness Fritz almost called to him. Unaware of Fritz, the Lieutenant took from his haversack an object. He gazed at it with resigned longing then hurled it into the ravine.

Fritz, hidden, watched. When the officer left, Fritz scrambled down the slope. Caught in some branches was the red book.

As the private sat, he opened a page at random and began to read in the middle of the book

“May 1, 1918. May Day. A welcome letter arrived from you, my dearest Lisle. I could barely wait to tear it open, so thrilled was your poor soldier. Then, I read it again and again. I am happy to have news and do not want it to end. Our confused emotions, you see. We are all in a sad condition, wanting home news and wondering if we will see home. Your poor soldier loves to hear about the children, even if they are squabbling, the village, Hans who you think cheats you. It makes a welcome change from our own reality.”

Fritz impatiently skipped to another place but kept reading.

“July 7, 1918. Bad fighting. Our positions are weak with gaps not covered sufficiently. They can be breached with ease. I have heard of fatigued units suffering under extreme fire who refused to advance upon the enemy. A letter from Lisle last week. She speaks much of Hans.”

“August 10, 1918. No mail for weeks. How I need to hear from my Lisle. A mail shipment left camp last month. Much is censored therefore I cannot write my true experience. I can only write generalities. All I have is my little Red Book to record my thoughts.”

“September 21, 1918. Yesterday was bad in the worst way. Ach! Berlin tells us we are winning the war but I, a professional soldier, am doubtful. We march our young troops fresh from the Fatherland into battle only to retreat in a rout from which we barely escape alive. Is this poor strategy? Is this observation treachery? Nothing from Lisle.”

Fritz turned to October 7, the day the book was thrown away.

“October 7, 1918. Worst news ever. Lisle has left me for Hans. She is no longer my wife, finished. Ich bin vertig.”

On October 8, 1918, in heavy fog, the 120<sup>th</sup> Landwehr Infantry was captured by some Americans led by a Tennessean. All but one surrendered. This soldier, an ashen faced lieutenant, marched with fixed bayonet and firm resolution toward the enemy. With a pistol rammed to his head, the captured commander shouted warnings to surrender.

“Halten Sie, soldat, Halten Sie,” but the soldier would not halt.

The lieutenant was regrettably shot.