

Harry Brown

A WALK IN THE SUN



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IN THE SUN*

by
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A WALK IN THE SUN

I

THE lieutenant had been wounded while they were still on the water. He was a slight, dark man named Rand, rather silly, and if he hadn't been doing something silly at the time he might never have been wounded. He had taken out his glasses and was leaning against the side of the landing barge, trying to focus on some firing off to the left. It was the first of the firing. Evidently one of the shore batteries had decided something was wrong and they had sent over a couple of shells. One of the destroyers had replied, a cruiser had joined in, and some batteries farther along the coast had also opened up. No one was hitting anything, and the whole action was taking place about three miles away.

The gun flashes were spectacular, however, and Lieutenant Rand had taken out his field glasses to watch what was going on. Not that he could see anything. That was the silly part of it. He might have been able to pick up the silhouette of a destroyer for a second, but by the time he could have adjusted his glasses the destroyer would have zigzagged out of range. The destroyers weren't waiting around for the lieutenant. Nevertheless he stuck his head up in the air and tried to pick up one of the ships, or possibly one of the shore batteries. Of course, disregarding the fact that it was a pointless thing to do, there seemed to be no danger in it. The firing was some miles off, the barge was still about twenty-four hundred yards from shore, and the night, or rather early morning, was dark.

There were no stars. And in a way it was a natural act on Lieutenant Rand's part. He was bored and he was nervous. He had been in the barge for some hours, and it was not the most comfortable place in the world. As the time of landing approached a growing tension was added to nervousness and discomfort. The men's mouths were dry. Sounds magnified themselves. The dark closed in like a smotherer's pillow.

Lieutenant Rand, a wry young man, had a dry natural curiosity, one that manifested itself in a love of facts. He had often expressed regret in mess that he was not in the artillery, because the computation of trajectory and like subjects fascinated him. Before the war he had been a C.P.A. in Hartford, Connecticut, and had he come a little later in the draft, or a little earlier, he might have found himself as a Finance officer in some quiet Army backwater. As things turned out, however, he came just at the right time to be sent to the Infantry, and then to OCS, and then, much too hurriedly for his ordered mind, to the Mediterranean. He was new to the company, replacing Lieutenant Grimes, who had been picked off by a sniper while climbing a wall in a small town near Gela, in Sicily. The company had gone through the whole Sicilian campaign short an officer, until Lieutenant Rand had finally caught up with it in Messina. This landing operation was the first action he had ever seen, and the guns that were flashing over on the left were the first serious guns he had ever heard. Therefore, to his logical mind it was logical that he watch them.

One of the shore batteries evidently decided that there was a whole fleet behind the cruiser and the destroyer. Its fire moved aimlessly over the sea in the direction of the barges, as though the shells were feeling for something. No one paid a great deal of attention to either the shells or Lieutenant Rand. As far as the men were concerned the shells could take care of themselves, and so could the lieutenant. When one burst very near the barge the men took it without rancor. They knew that the shells were disinter-

ested; they were not aimed for them. A man can always tell when a shell is looking for him. A shell that is seeking a man out doesn't whine. It snarls. So when the shell struck near the barge some of the men said "Bastards," impersonally and quite without feeling, and let it go at that. And when the next shell, almost immediately afterwards, struck some three hundred yards to the right, they knew that there was no need to worry.

Lieutenant Rand had his glasses to his eyes when the shell struck, trying to adjust them with the thumb and middle finger of his left hand. He had pushed his helmet back on his head, because the steel rim kept getting in the way of the eyepieces, and it annoyed him. He was aware of a great mushrooming whiteness in front of him, and then someone pinched his left cheek very hard. Lieutenant Rand said "Oh," and turned around to see who was pinching him. Then he slid slowly down to a sitting position.

Sergeant Porter, who had been standing behind the lieutenant, felt a steady pressure on the calf of one leg. When he looked to find out what it was he could dimly make out the lieutenant sitting on the floor of the barge, his hands hanging down at his sides. At first he thought that Rand had gone to sleep, and for a moment he felt annoyed that he should choose to sleep when it was almost time to pile out. Then he remembered that a moment before Lieutenant Rand had been standing up looking over the side. A shell had hit quite close, too. No one could go to sleep that quickly, unless he'd been without sleep for days. Sergeant Porter bent down by the lieutenant.

"Anything the matter, sir?" he asked.

"Oh," Lieutenant Rand said. "Oh. Oh." The words were more a surprised grunt than anything else. The lieutenant did not move his arms.

Cautiously Sergeant Porter ran his hands over Rand's chest. He felt nothing. Then he touched his face.

"Jesus," he said. "All gone."

He wiped his hand on his thigh. "Pete," he said. "Hey, Pete." Staff Sergeant Halverson came over. "What's the matter?"

"Shell splinter got the lieutenant. Smashed his face all to hell." Halverson bent down. "I can't see anything," he said.

"I can feel it," Sergeant Porter said. "Messy. I think it took his whole face away."

"Where's your flashlight?"

"You can't shine a light out here, Pete."

"Oh. Oh," Lieutenant Rand said. He caught his breath twice.

"I can shine a light if I have to shine a light. Where's the thing?"

Porter took his flashlight out of the hip pocket of his fatigues and passed it to Halverson. "Cover over him," Halverson said. "I'm just going to take a quick look."

They bent over Rand, their helmets almost touching. Halverson switched on the light. "I told you," Sergeant Porter said. Lieutenant Rand's left cheek and eye were covered with blood. It was impossible to make out whether or not the eye was still there. Even by the brief, dim glare of the flashlight the two sergeants could see that a good part of his cheek had been carried away. Jagged white bits of bone, splinters from a smashed zygoma, stuck out at several places. Blood dripped down on his shoulder. Lieutenant Rand's mouth kept opening and closing, like the gills of a fish out of water. His good eye was wide open.

"Douse that light," somebody hissed.

Staff Sergeant Halverson switched off the flashlight. "Go get that god-damned First Aid man. What's his name? McWilliams. He might as well start earning his money."

"Where is he?" Porter asked.

"Down in the stern," Halverson said. "I saw him down in the stern."

Porter picked his way among the men towards the stern. The night was so dark that men five yards away from the lieutenant

did not know he had been wounded. There was a silent cluster of cramped figures in the stern. "Where's McWilliams?" Porter said. "Where's McWilliams, the First Aid man?"

"Who's that?" a man said.

"Sergeant Porter."

One of the figures rose to his feet and broke with the darkness. "Here I am, Sergeant," McWilliams said. "You want me?"

"The lieutenant's hurt up front," Porter said. "Sergeant Halver-son said for you to go up."

"What's the matter with him, Sergeant?" McWilliams wanted to know. He spoke in a slow, dispassionate drawl.

"Get the hell up and see," Porter said. "You want me to bring him down here?"

"I was just asking," said McWilliams. He moved toward the front of the barge.

"What's the matter with the lieutenant, Sergeant?" a man asked. "Old rockin' chair get him?" Porter recognized the voice as that of Rivera, a machine-gunner.

"God-damn shell got him," he said.

Rivera whistled. "No kidding?" a man said. "Honest to God?" said another. "That's the trouble with these tubs," Rivera said. "They only make the armor plate six inches thick. That wouldn't keep out a BB from a BB Daisy air gun. You mean that one that hit so close?"

Porter nodded his head wearily, then remembered that no one could see him nodding in the dark. "Yeah," he said.

"He dead?" Rivera asked.

"Not yet," Sergeant Porter said. "He had his head over the side. He was looking through the binoculars."

"That's a Purple Heart, sure as hell," Rivera said. "How'd you like to have a Purple Heart, Jakie?"

"Depends where I got the Purple Heart," Private Friedman said. "In the leg, okay. In the guts, no."

"A Purple Heart means a nice quiet trip to Jersey City," Rivera said. "I would like a nice quiet trip to Jersey City."

"I'd like a nice quiet trip anywheres," said Private Judson. "I ain't had a quiet trip since this war started. Jersey City will do fine."

"It blew the hell out of the side of his head," Sergeant Porter said. He felt guilty, as though Lieutenant Rand's wound was a secret that he shouldn't be telling. He knew he should go back and see if there was anything he could do, but he did not want to go back. He did not want to help Halverson. If the lieutenant was going to die, he was going to die, and there was nothing Eddie Porter could do about it. Nothing in the world.

"In the head, no," Private Friedman said. "I don't want a Purple Heart in the head."

"Joey Sims got a Purple Heart in the head," Rivera said. "I bet to Christ he'll look better when they're through with him than you do now."

"It depends on the position," Private Friedman said. "Position is everything in life."

"Is Sergeant Halverson in command now, Sergeant?" Rivera asked.

"He knows what to do," Porter said. Halverson had been in command before, after they lost Lieutenant Grimes. Halverson had been in command almost from Gela all the way to Messina. Halverson had done all right. If the captain had liked him a little more, he probably would have been commissioned in the field. But the captain had preferred to hang on and wait for a replacement. The platoon had had very bad luck with lieutenants. First Grimes, and now Rand. If Halverson had got the breaks he might have been sitting very pretty right now.

Porter was just as glad that Halverson hadn't got the breaks, for Porter did not like Halverson. He was afraid of him. Halverson was cold and competent, and Porter distrusted coldness and compe-

tence. Even in a war, he felt, the human elements should enter in. He did not, of course, think of it just in that way, nor could he have phrased it in such a fashion if he had been called upon to do so. There was enough coldness and competence in the machines, the tanks and the planes. Nothing was colder than a battened-down tank moving over a field. It was cold, heartless, brainless, but it was alive. It could reason and it could kill. Sergeant Porter was afraid of tanks in the same way he was afraid of Sergeant Halverson. Sergeant Porter was not a good soldier, not because he was afraid, but because he was afraid of the wrong things. All soldiers, unless they have gone berserk, are afraid, but there are qualities and grades of fear. There is more to war than the rifle and the knife thrust in the dark.

The knot of men lapsed into silence in the darkness. They really had not wanted to talk, but they had forced themselves to say something. Talking was a form of bravado. If a man said something, no matter what it was, it seemed to him that he was saying: "Here I am, very calm, very collected. Nothing's going to happen to me. The rest of the company's going to be wiped out, but nothing's going to happen to me. See, I can talk. I can form sentences. Do you think I could make conversation if I knew I was going to die?" Yet every man, inwardly, had a hard core of doubt that rested in the pit of his stomach and threatened to disgorge itself at any moment. Their voices, when they talked, were strange, but none of them noticed the strangeness, because when each man spoke his own voice sounded odd, and so it all seemed correct somehow. If a phonograph record of the men's voices had been made then and played back to them later, not one of them would have recognized himself. They would have thought it was a joke—a very elaborate joke. And in a way it would have been.

Sergeant Porter worked his way back toward the bow of the barge. Once he stepped on a man's hand, and the man swore at him. Porter paid no attention.

Three or four of the platoon were gathered around Lieutenant Rand. Halverson was leaning against the side of the barge. In the darkness McWilliams was sprinkling sulfa on the wound. "How is he?" Porter asked. Halverson shrugged in the dark. "He's stopped his noise," he said. "I thought he was going to say something a while back. He tried to say something. Where were you?"

"Down there," Porter said.

"I wanted you."

"What for?"

"It doesn't matter now," Halverson said. "Stick around."

"You going to take over?" Sergeant Porter asked.

"I've got to see the captain," Halverson said. "As soon as we land I've got to see him. That is, if I can find him. I can't take over without seeing him."

Porter tried to make out Halverson's expression, but all he could see was shadows. He knew that Halverson was looking at him, and the thought made him frown, made him want to say something. He didn't like to have people looking at him. It made him nervous. It always had.

"Do you know what to do?" he asked.

"There's a house," Halverson said. "A farm. Three or four houses, as a matter of fact. That's where we're going."

"Pretty hard to find, isn't it?"

"That's the objective. It's on the map. There's a road from the beach leads right past it."

"How far?"

"A hell of a way. Six miles."

The frown deepened on Porter's face. "What the hell do they expect on the beach, a reception committee?" he said.

"That's the story," Halverson said. "That's all I know. How's it coming, Mac?"

"All right, I guess," McWilliams said. "We better get him to a

doctor, though, or he ain't going to be pretty any more. He might not be alive any more, either."

"Bad, hey?" Halverson said.

"I guess so," McWilliams said. "I guess he got a pretty bad shock, too. He's trying to talk all the time. Can't you hear him?"

The two sergeants listened. "I don't hear anything," Porter said.

"It ain't words," McWilliams said. "It's just talk."

"Where are his binoculars?" Halverson wanted to know.

"They must have fallen overboard," Porter said. "I didn't hear them fall."

Halverson bent down. "Is he comfortable, Mac?"

"He wouldn't know whether he was comfortable or not," McWilliams said. "No sense in moving him, though. He'll be all right where he is."

"That's good," Halverson said. He rose to his feet. "Hell of a thing."

"He don't mind," said McWilliams.

The whole barge knew that the lieutenant had been wounded, but no one seemed terribly interested. It was not that they didn't care. It was simply that most of them had seen a lot of death, and death, unless it was of a really special variety, was not something that a man got up and moved around to investigate. There was no sense in getting up and walking over just to see a wounded man, even if you knew him quite well. And besides, the lieutenant was new. He hadn't been with the company more than—how long was it?—oh, two weeks or so. Not really long enough to get acquainted, anyway. He hadn't really slugged it out in the field with them. He didn't know anything about the Kasserine or Bizerte or any of those places. He was, as a matter of fact, a visitor who had come to stay a little while and then had gone away. The company wouldn't ever see him again, in all probability, nor would his platoon, which probably knew him better than anyone else. After all,

he was lucky. It was quick in and quick out for Lieutenant Rand.

"What did the lieutenant do before he got in the Army?" Private Archimbeau asked. Not that he really cared. He just wanted to make conversation. He wanted to talk.

"He was a civilian," Private Trasker said. "A lousy civilian."

"You kill me," Private Archimbeau said.

"He was a business man," said Private Cousins. "He worked in an office."

"I worked in an office," Private Trasker said. "But I wasn't no business man."

"The whole god-damned army's made up of business men," said an unidentified voice.

"You kill me," said Private Archimbeau. "He'll be a business man in 1958, when we're fighting the Battle of Tibet. I got the facts down cold. They'll put him on a nice hospital ship and take him to a nice hospital and give him a couple of medals and take him home and give him his walking papers. Then he'll go back to business while we fight the Battle of Tibet. I got the facts."

"Maybe he'll die," Private Cousins said.

"Nobody dies," said Private Trasker.

The lieutenant's wound worried Corporal Tyne. Not that Rand was a good man or anything like that; not at all. Rand, as far as Corporal Tyne knew, wasn't a very good man at all. Competent, maybe—but not good. In the Army the word "good" is a superlative. A good officer is the Merriwell type. He always gets where he wants to go, and he keeps his casualties down. He knows when to be hard and when to relax. He will bear down on his men in barracks, but when he's out in the field he will call them Joe and Charlie and swear at them and pat them on the back as though he were the coach of a football team. Lieutenant Rand had never called any of his men Joe or Charlie, nor had he sworn at them or patted them on the back. He had taken them as they came, rather like figures on an adding machine, and he had always

seemed slightly surprised that they added up to human beings. Rand was a quiet, aloof man who had a habit of doing the wrong thing quietly and aloofly. He hadn't really been at home in the Infantry, even in the little time he had been with the company. You had to be calm, and Rand wasn't calm, even though he walked measuredly and never smiled and ate with a solemn, rather annoying preciseness. If Rand had been a calm man he would never have stuck his head over the side of the barge and tried to make out the firing.

But he had, and there he was, sitting down and gasping, his cheek torn to shreds. That put it on Halverson again. Tyne absent-mindedly pushed his helmet, the straps of which hung loosely on either side of his face, down hard. It gave him a warm, comfortable feeling. Halverson would be all right. He knew his way around. He had done a nice job in Sicily, keeping his eyes open, doing the right thing, never getting out of line. Corporal Tyne admired Halverson; he didn't like him, but he admired him. For what he did, he was a good man.

"You should have seen his face." It was Sergeant Porter.

"I've seen faces before," Tyne said.

"Yeah, but the first time, before anything had happened. The guy may die, Bill."

Corporal Tyne said nothing. He studied Sergeant Porter's figure, looming before him. Porter was a good three inches taller than he was, and heavier. Fatter, too. His face, had Tyne been able to see it, would have been a cross between a thug's and a child's. Sergeant Porter's eyes always looked just a little frightened, but he had the heavy jaw of a preliminary boy. He was a beautiful drill sergeant, but he seemed to lack something in the field. Two hundred years ago, when battles had been parades, Eddie Porter would have done all right, but not now. He could not quite seem to connect the facts of battle in his mind, did not seem to realize that men no longer marched into machine-guns, that they