Patrol Into Fear

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Sergeant Caldwell of the third squad sat in the light-proofed hovel which served as the platoon Command Post and watched Lieutenant Quimby across the battered table top poring over the sector map. Every night it was like this, with Quimby scanning the maps like one of the top officers in SHAEF and every night he came up with the same orders—night patrol for the third squad.

The sergeant sat there and looked across the dimly lighted silence at Quimby and wondered if anyone could hate anything like he hated this damned, ersatz shavetail, who always put on the act of being a great strategist and who never came up with an original idea. The sergeant looked at Quimby’s forehead and at Quimby’s nose which traveled down his face a little to the left of center and at his eyes which seemed to be taking in the map point by point, and the sergeant wondered if Quimby actually spent this interview time every night really studying the maps or if it were not some kind of a war nerves set up to impress the sergeant with the lieutenant’s deep thought and dignity. The sergeant wondered how long Quimby had had his bars, and he wondered if he had been a human being before he had become an officer. He suddenly felt the urge to get Quimby stinking drunk and then kick the hell out of him. The idea sounded good to the sergeant and he smiled over the vision of Quimby lying on the ground and yelling quits. That would be rich. He realized that that sort of conduct was not the kind of thing which would be exactly befitting a non-com of the United States Army, but it sure would be a hell of a lot of fun, and over here a guy had to take whatever he could find for amusement. That sure would be a big break in the monotony of this place, getting this gutless Quimby drunk and then knocking the hell out of him. That would be good. Even worth the bust. The sergeant began working out the details, half seriously, in his mind and had decided on cognac as the best tempter when Quimby released his gaze from the map.

“Well, sergeant, you look happy tonight. Everything going well in the third squad?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good. Good. I’m going to send you and your men out on another little patrol tonight, sergeant.”

Quimby had said those same words every night since the outfit had come up on the line. Every night for the last two weeks this brass bound idiot had taken a half hour or more digesting the map of the area and every night he had come up with this same world shaking conclusion for the activity of the third squad. The sergeant wished Lieutenant Quimby would take his night patrols and go straight to
hell with them. That's what he wished, and he wished there were some loophole in the ruggedness of Army decorum that would let him get away with telling Quimby how he felt.

"Sergeant, this outfit has been damned lucky. We're all as green as grass in this business, and most of our men haven't had the required amount of training in the States and no combat experience at all. We were damned lucky to get pulled up to the line here when this sector was relatively quiet. I hate to think what would have happened if we would have come up when things were really moving."

"Yes sir." The sergeant thought about saying that he had a little trouble seeing how any outfit could be considered lucky to come up to the line at anytime.

"Now we've only been here two weeks and nothing's been going on. But some day things are going to get hot around this sector and we've got a lot of kinks to iron out before that happens. Now I want you to be perfectly frank with me, sergeant. I want you to tell me exactly how you feel about the men in your squad. I want to know if you feel that there should be any changes made in personnel."

"Well, . . ."

"Now before you answer, I want you to momentarily forget all loyalty to your men, and consider this question from the standpoint of bettering the squad. What do you think?"

The sergeant thought the whole damned squad should be sent back to the girl scouts. He even flirted with the idea of suggesting that Quimby get a new squad leader. He said, "Well sir, I don't really know the boys. Only been with them two weeks so far, you know. But I think probably they will all shape up if we can give them enough time."

"Yes. I hope we'll have enough time to give them. Now sergeant, this is no criticism, but the third squad has been consistently assigned night patrols in order to get at least one squad of the platoon developed to the point where they can operate efficiently at night. Of course, we can't expect miracles of the men, but you know the results of the night patrols so far have been pretty negative."

The sergeant wished he could bring himself to ask Quimby to get off his fat ass and come out with the squad some night and show the boys how it should be done. He said, "We've made a lot of mistakes, sir. But the men will snap out of it with a little more experience."

"You have fine confidence, sergeant. I'm sure the third squad will do well. Now for tonight, I understand the Germans are making some kind of an installation in that little grove over to the northeast. Some kind of a CP. Find out what kind it is—artillery or infantry or what—if you can get close enough. And find out how much fire power they are putting around it."

The sergeant wondered why Quimby did not ask him to string a telephone line over so he could interview the German high command by voice.
"And keep an eye on the men. See if you can tell which are just along for the ride."

"Yes sir."

"It's about nine-thirty now. You can move off at twenty-two hundred without any difficulty, can't you?"

"Yes sir, twenty-two hundred." The sergeant got up and started for the doorway which was shrouded in blankets acting as a light lock.

"Oh, and sergeant, we're all in this together, you know. Chin up. Everything will work out." Quimby smiled as if it was a gift.

"Yes sir." Now the bastard was trying to get chummy. Great boy, Quimby. Great.

The sergeant walked out of the CP into the solid blackness of the night and felt the cold mist that oozed out of sky onto his hands and face. He began counting off the hundred and twenty-eight steps that it took to get to his dugout, and the hatred he had developed for this filthy, eternally soggy life in the two weeks he had been on the line, came back to him. He had never told Quimby or the boys of the squad what he felt about the whole deal, but without discussing it with anyone he had come to the conclusion that he was sick and tired of these damned night witch hunts across the mouldy French terrain, and he wished the whole damned Army would go the hell away and let him get a good night's sleep.

He dropped down into the dugout and felt his way over to his corner. He put a match to a cigarette and then held the flame up and looked around.

"Hi, men." There they were, all four of these pretty, young civilians that shared the same dugout and the same squad. There was Beadnell, who had the pasty face of a junior file clerk. There was Jorgensen, the rube who looked as if he should be looking across a plow at the rump end of a team of horses on a Minnesota farm. There was Gallatin, a character who was always waxing academic instead of cleaning his rifle or trying to get a pair of socks dry. And over in the far corner was Kaufman, whom the sergeant had given up trying to figure out. But this wasn't bad enough. The sergeant had to play mother to another dugout full of these cherubic hicks who were also assigned to the third squad.

He said, "Jorgensen, run over to Mac's dugout and tell the boys to get ready for twenty-two hundred. Take all your gear and we'll pick you up over there. Tell him to snap to, we can't keep the Wehrmacht waiting, you know."

Jorgensen squeezed out the doorway and the sergeant leaned back against his blanket roll. He lapsed into bitter reflection. What ever in the hell hac! made him ask for a transfer out of that stateside training center into a hell hole like this was something that he had been kicking around a lot for the last two weeks. Christ, he must have been nuts. If ever a guy had it made, he sure had back there along
the Jersey coast. It was hard to see now what had made him jolt loose from a deal like that. Just forty-five minutes from the city. What a lush set up that had been. But no, that wasn’t good enough for Sergeant Caldwell. He had to go on to greater things. He had to ask for a transfer overseas. He had to participate in the glory of winning the war physically. He had to go and give up a deal like that for a soggy, stinking hole like this. He had to trade his stateside buddies for a bunch of ignorant kids that didn’t know enough to stand on the right side of the latrine on a windy night. He began to wonder if he shouldn’t have a little talk with the psychiatrist. Just an explanation of the deal would convince anybody that he was nuts.

But then there had been Marie, back there in Jersey. He had not thought much about her when he had started going with her, but then the Sundays at her house became more and more regular and one day the sergeant had realized that she meant more to him than he liked to think about. Marie had not said anything that a guy could exactly put his finger on. She would not have intentionally said anything, even if she would have felt like saying it. But she had a brother out in the Pacific, and somehow the sergeant wondered if maybe the contrast wasn’t pretty big. The idea had worked on him too much, and he had given too much thought to it, until one day he went to see the CO about it. From then on there had not been any way back. There had been no chance to say that he had made a mistake, and that he wanted to start all over again back at the training center. It had been a one way squeeze from the port of embarkation through the replacement center and on to the position of squad leader to this sorry bunch of kids. He hoped Marie appreciated it, damn her anyway. And damn her brother too, he was mostly responsible.

The sergeant dragged the last puff out of his cigarette and crushed it out on the floor. The luminous hands of his watch showed about five minutes till ten. He said, “Ok, kiddies, get your rubbers on. It’s dampish out and I don’t want to have to go home and tell your mammas that you caught your death of cold.”

From Kaufman’s corner he heard, “Aw lay off, Sarge, we can’t be as bad as you’re always lettin’ on.”

“No, Kaufman, Goddam it. That’s what I said the first night I took you guys out. I said nobody could be as bad off on night patrols as you guys are.”

“Well what the hell do you want? Would it make you happy if we went out and captured a big chunk of the German army? Would that make you happy?”

“You know, Kaufman, this’ll be a surprise to you, but I really don’t think you’ll ever capture a German, unless it’s a girl, and she’d have to be under six even then.”

“Aw get off my back, Sarge.”

“Ok Kaufman, but you haven’t heard anything yet. If you pull another deal like that one last week when you let those German scouts
sneak right past the ass end of our patrol, you better give your heart to God because the rest of you is going to belong to me. You think I’m tough on you. You should’ve heard that bastard Quimby eat me out after that one.”

There was silence and the sergeant smiled in the darkness. He would have to remember that Kaufman was sensitive to references to past mistakes. That would be handy whenever Kaufman got smart with him. The sergeant knew that it was easy to let a German sneak right up under your nose in the miserable blackness of these overcast nights, but Quimby had literally blown his stack about those German scouts coming through last week, so what the hell. Besides, this Kaufman needed to be set straight once in a while.

“And now if this cozy little section of the third squad of the beaver patrol is ready, we’ll shove off.”

The sergeant led the way out of the dugout, and the lightless substance of the French night closed around them, cutting them off from everything but sound. They stood still outside for a moment and listened to what went on. It was quiet. Too quiet, the sergeant thought. The sounds of spasmodic firing came from far to the north, rattling suddenly through the night. The sergeant said in a half-whisper, “Let’s go.”

They started in the direction of Mac’s dugout, keeping track of their positions by the sounds of their footsteps on the wet grass. They hadn’t gone quite a hundred feet when they heard Mac’s voice, “Here, Sarge.”

“Got all your boys here, Mac?”

“Yeh.”

“Okay, bring them in close. Now get this. Quimby seems to think we ought to cut out our night time walking exercises and do a little reconnaissance for a change. He hungers for information, and we are elected to get it for him. In short, it would be appreciated by the brass and even a little bit by me if you guys would go out there tonight and keep your eyes and your ears open for a change. Watch for lights and listen for Krauts, and in general act alive for once. Any questions?”

There was no sound and the sergeant wondered what kind of expressions the boys were wearing on their faces. He said, “Everybody ready?”

“Yeh.”

“One more thing. Kaufman, you’re not worth a damn at the back of the squad. You come up next to me and let Beadnell take the end. Let’s go.”

The sergeant moved off across the field to the northeast. He could hear the boys coming behind him trying to step quietly on the soggy grass. This was it—another weird walk in the night. Another expedition into God knew what.
The sergeant tried to accustom his eyes to the blackness, but it was no good. He could not even see the end of his rifle. Damn these no good European nights. Damn Quimby and his night patrols. Damn the whole damned war to hell.

It was more than just hatred for the night patrols that got on the sergeant’s nerves. If it had been only hatred he might have been able to swear about it enough to lessen that. It was something deeper. The sergeant noticed that his heart always beat faster when he was walking across these uncertain fields with their miserable briar-ridden hedgerows, and it worried him. It was not anything that he knew exactly, but deep inside the sergeant wondered if maybe he was not just plain scared. He did not like to think about that angle, and yet here was something that was not quite right. He did not like to think about himself being a coward—being yellow, but this uneasy feeling that always followed him across the field did not look good and it worried him. He sometimes found himself wondering what he would do if he stumbled into a bunch of Krauts face to face. He wondered if he would freeze in terror, or if he would run away, or if he would yell like a scared kid and make a posthumous ass of himself with the total Allied and German armies for an audience. He wasn’t sure what he would do, and thinking about it never seemed to get him any closer to the answer.

Then there were these kids following him. Maybe it was the kids that made him feel this way. This nursemaid duty in a place like this was not the best deal in the world. Maybe if he had a good squad, one that he could have confidence in, he might lose this unaccessness. That must be it. It must be something like that. He had had guts enough to get into this mess just to square himself with Marie, that must prove something.

The sergeant began wondering how far ahead the nearest hedge-row was. It could not be far now. They had come about two hundred yards and fifty more ought to bring them to the hedgerow.

He began counting off the steps, just to see if his calculations were running in good shape. He had not counted more than a half dozen when he heard a sound from up ahead. It sounded as if someone had stumbled into a hedgerow and dropped a rifle. Then it was followed by, “Hundeseele!”

The sergeant stopped in his tracks and crouched. The voice could not have been more than fifty yards away. He listened for the steps of his squad. Everything was quiet. Could it be, he wondered, that these knuckle heads in his squad were getting on the ball? The sergeant listened to his heart pounding against his ribs, and felt the palms of his hands get clammy against the stock of his rifle.

Everything was quiet. Too goddam quiet. Why the hell could not there be a little noise or a little light or a little of both in the world when a guy wanted it so bad. Everything was a nauseating
void except for his heart jerking at the inside of his chest. Then he heard it. The slow squish, squish of steps on the wet grass. Good God, these Krauts were walking right into the squad! He listened again. It sounded like three, not more than four of them. They were getting close. Too close. Too damned close! The sergeant's finger felt along the smooth front of the trigger. He was trying to get his heart to quit pounding long enough to get another good listen when he heard it.

It said, “Wer sind Sie?”

Jesus God, that voice was loud! And it came from right beside his right elbow!

The sergeant's heart clutched at the inside of his neck. He felt a stream of liquid terror flow down his back a foot wide. He crouched there and wanted to turn and look to his right, but he was afraid of bumping into the muzzle of a German gun if he moved. He crouched there in that godawful, death-like silence and felt his heart pound in slow convulsive throbs. Why didn't somebody do something? Why the hell didn't somebody do something?

The footsteps of the Krauts ahead had stopped, and the sergeant started turning over in his mind the puzzle of how the hell one of the bastards could have got so close—right there beside him—without him hearing him. He was working on it there in the silence. He was sweating and thinking, trying to overcome the confusion. This eternal blackness had done it. Too much of this night prowling had cracked him up, had short circuited his faculties. He had almost decided to swing his rifle around to the right and fire point blank, when it came again.

“Wer sind Sie?” It was loud and clear, like it was the only sound in the world. And it came from right beside him like the first time. It gushed into the sergeant's ear and mingled with the blood in his head and flowed away down his spine.

Then he had it. Kaufman! That was Kaufman's voice. Why, that goddamn bone brain was talking to those Krauts out there.

The sergeant started breathing again as the relief swept over him. Then one of the Germans said, “Freunde. Wir haben uns verirrt.”

Kaufman said “Einen Augenblick, bitte.” Then the sergeant felt Kaufman's hand on his shoulder and heard him whisper, “Keep the squad far enough away so the Krauts won't hear them. I'm goin' to take those boys in.”

Kaufman moved away, and the sergeant tried to get his mind working. He was not sure about this deal. He was not sure what a guy was supposed to do in a case like this. He couldn't remember that he had ever read in the book that it was customary to carry on conversations with the enemy on chance encounters like this.

The sergeant heard Kaufman up ahead say, “Folgen Sie mir,” and then he heard footsteps going away to the north and then turning westward, back in the direction of the CP. He waited until he
thought they had enough lead and then he moved off after them. He walked a few steps and then he stopped to listen. The boys were coming behind him, and he felt pretty good for a change. These guys were following through just like they had stage directions. Maybe it was not such a bad squad, at that. He walked slowly so as not to gain on Kaufman and the Germans, and he began wondering how the hell Kaufman happened to know how to speak German. That Kaufman was really a mystery. It would not hurt to study up on that guy just to see what makes him tick.

They had gone quite a ways back to the west and the sergeant knew they were passing some of the forward dugouts of the platoon. If Kaufman had not got mixed up in his directions he must be getting in the neighborhood of the CP. And if he had got mixed up, he would sure be in for an interesting night wandering around the sector playing host to a bunch of lost Krauts.

Then the sergeant heard the CP guard up ahead say “Halt.”

Kaufman had made it that far without getting shot. This was going to be ticklish. The sergeant didn’t go for yelling in places like this at night, but Kaufman was liable to get in a jam otherwise. He cupped his hands toward the CP and said, “Tell them to drop the hardware, Kaufman. We’re all around them.”

Kaufman blurted German and there was the sound of rifles falling to the ground. That was easy. The sergeant began wondering how the hell those Krauts had fallen for a deal like that. They were either damn stupid or they had come to the point where they were willing. It didn’t make sense. Capturing Germans was supposed to be tougher than this.

The guard herded the Germans into Quimby’s CP and the sergeant went in after them. Quimby was ecstatic. He kept saying, “Good work, good work, Caldwell,” and filling out forms and making arrangements for prisoner escorts. Finally the sergeant turned to go and Quimby said, “Your squad is shaping up. Tell the boys they did great work tonight.”

“Yeh, great. If we get three every night the war will be over in a few million years.”

“Heh, heh. That’s all right sergeant. This is your night. You can afford to be flippant for once.”

“Thanks.” To hell with this condescending bastard.

“Of course, sergeant, we can’t exactly say the mission was accomplished tonight. Unless, that is, these prisoners will spill what we want to know about that new German installation.”

The sergeant was getting ready to tell Quimby that if there were to be anymore patrols tonight he would have to do it himself.

Quimby said, “We can wait till tomorrow night, however. You and your boys have done well enough to deserve a little relaxation. Take the rest of the night off and then you’ll be good and ready for tomorrow.”
"That's what I like about the Army—always something to look forward to."

"You know, sergeant, it's lucky for you that I understand your sarcastic sense of humor. It's very good really. A little trying at times, though. You should try to control it. Someday you might be working under someone who wouldn't understand."

"I'll see what I can do." The sergeant closed the CP door and started for the dugout. He felt pretty good until he remembered how scared he had been when he heard those German words at his elbow. How scared. Yellow. That was it, yellow. He hadn't really realized it before. He had just skirted around it. He had refused to admit it to himself,—refused to face the fact that the uneasy feeling which always dogged him on the patrols came from his being yellow. What would Marie say if she knew it. Maybe she wouldn't think anything about it. Maybe she would say that it was natural for anyone to be scared in situations like that. Maybe she would kiss him and say he was the bravest sergeant in the world. Maybe she would look at it that way and maybe she wouldn't. She might laugh and say she had known it all the time. That she had known he was yellow because he had held onto that stateside training center job when all the real men were out getting themselves shot at long before.

Marie was such a wonderful girl, and probably she would understand. But then there was her brother in the Pacific.

The sergeant slid between the walls of the dugout doorway and hung up his rifle and the rest of the gear before he dropped onto his blankets. Then he said, "Kaufman, how come those Krauts fell for your mouldy German?"

"Mouldy? Why, I got nothin' but the best Hochdeutsch accent. Lived in Munich till I was eight, and my folks talk German all the time at home."

"Well bless your little pointed head."

"Boy we really got on the ball tonight, huh, Sarge? What'd old Quimby say?"

"He said you'd probably replace Eisenhower within a week, that is if they can get you house broke enough to get along in SHAEF."

"Aw, damn it, Sarge. I thought if we went out and did some good for once, you might lay off for a while."

Sergeant Caldwell rolled over and pulled the blanket up around him. He knew he could not lay off. He knew that if a guy that was yellow stopped acting tough, it would not be long before he would not be fooling anyone. And there would be more patrols. There would be tomorrow night and the next night and every night from now on. And he knew that that feeling would be there to haunt him, and that he had to put up a good show. He said, "Why don't you run down to headquarters and see if they have any old medals left. You could hang them on the end of your rifle and scare all the Krauts to death."

"Aw, go to hell."