

AWOL

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When Captain Johnson entered the Orderly Room after a quick drink at the Officers' Club, Sergeant Connelly was waiting for him. He stood looking out the window at the ordered rows of white barracks which seemed to stretch forever across the hot sand. In the distance the heat waves rising lent a dream-like quality to the troops drilling on the parade grounds.

Hearing the quick firm steps, the First Sergeant turned.

"Sir?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to speak to you about Corporal Jenkins."

"Oh?" said the Captain, raising his brows, "I wasn't aware there was anything to talk about. The O. D. told me all about it. His leaving can't be excused."

"A body don't think so good when he finds out his kid's got infantile p'ralysis," replied the Sergeant, the lines on his leathery face growing deeper.

"All he had to do was wait for the Red Cross to clear him for an 'emergency'." The Captain was becoming angry.

"Like I said, sir, sometimes a body don't think so good." The sergeant's voice was more growl than respect.

The two men stood facing each other, faces red, breath fast. A vein throbbled alarmingly on Captain Johnson's temple.

"I got the orders all writ." The non-com was interrupted by the telephone. While he was occupied the officer strode on into his office, where he sat for several minutes staring at the green blotter. Hesitating, he opened his mouth, then instead, walked slowly out to Connelly's desk. "About Jenkins," he opened.

"Don't matter about Jenkins." The Sergeant's voice was tired "They picked him up as he was goin' into the hospital. The kid died an hour ago."

From the direction of Headquarters came the boom of the cannon, and then the faint notes of Retreat wailed across the desert.