

Infiltration Course

Harry White

THE machine gunner was loading his weapon. The snap of the bolt punctuated the soft rattle of the cartridge belt as it was drawn from the ammo box. The gunner's movements were accurate and swift, automatic. When he grasped the handles, they became an extension of his arms, and the gun a part of him. When he bent forward and lined up his sights, there was no longer a gunner and a gun, but a single weapon, a single machine.

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Private Will Foster sat on the ground, watching a small silhouetted bird wheel against the brass of the hazy sky. His rifle was cradled in his arms and his steel helmet was tilted on his head so he could hear the Captain, who was standing, legs apart and arms folded, before the Company. His voice was sharp and formal in the still afternoon air.

"Down there,"—he motioned to the shallow valley below,—“is the Infiltration Course. To your right is the trench where you men will assemble in ranks, just as you are now. To your left is the machine gun platform. These gunners, during your progress through the course, will be firing about thirty-six inches above your heads.”

The Captain paused for the murmur which ran through the Company. He unfolded his arms and clasped his hands behind his back.

He continued, “Those gunners are combat veterans. If there is an accident, it will not be their fault.”

Tommy Golway, sitting next to Will, shifted his weight on the sand, pushing his short arms out behind his fat stubby body and fastening his sight rigidly on the olive drab field jacket of the man in the rank ahead.

“Between the trench and the platform,” the Captain went on, “you see a number of small pits surrounded by sandbags. Each of those pits contains a harmless charge which will be set off as you pass them.

“Do not—I repeat—DO NOT—under ANY circumstances—stand or even get to your hands and knees between the time you leave the trench and your arrival at the gunners' platform. When you reach it, crawl under it and fall in over there by the range shack.”

The Captain looked up at the bird which Will had been watching.

“Okay, Sergeant, let's get 'em going.”

The whistle sounded and Will, stiff from sitting in the sand, got to his feet. Golway, he noticed in surprise, made no effort to get up. Will tapped a knuckle on the helmet beneath him.

“C'mon, Tommy. The Sarge'll be on you.”

Tommy's eyes blinked. He arose slowly, not speaking, his face pasty and flat.

There was a command and the Company stepped off on its left foot. A hundred men, legs welded on a locomotive drive rod. An unbreaking rhythm, each man carried forward without effort. A hundred men and one Company. A hundred parts and one machine.

They reached the trench and marched in. The Sergeant turned them and they faced the forward wall. They waited.

Will stood in the second row. He looked at Tommy standing at his side and wanted to speak, but, seeing his face, he could think of nothing to say. The blue eyes were wide and his lips were thin and purple. His hand was fumbling at his cheek and the bright red stone in the ring on his finger glowed against the white skin.

"First rank over!" The command roared into the silence. The row of olive clad figures boosted themselves to the log at the rim of the trench and slithered over.

As the brass nailed soles of their boots disappeared, a violent cracking began in the air above. Like a thousand bull whips, Will thought as he looked up and saw nothing. Bullets. Invisible and cracking like bull whips. Far away, he could hear the solid chatter of the machine guns as they fired—and then he tried not to hear as he felt the twisting of his stomach.

"Second rank over!"

Will moved himself forward and up. As he went over, he glanced back. Golway was starting, his face glistening, stark against the black of the timber.

The first charges were set off as they gathered themselves to move forward. A fountain of sand shot up in the air and the concussion struck at them, shifting the sand on which they lay. Dirt and dust sifted into Will's eyes and mouth as he waited for Tommy to catch up.

"Noisy, huh?" Will shouted, trying to laugh away his own fear, searching for a bond to help himself along. Tommy looked at him, but his eyes were not focused.

Will began to inch along, pulling with his elbows and pushing with his knees in the abrasive sand. Golway followed, squirming along in a deep furrow. They were among the sandbagged pits, now, and the afternoon was filled with sound and dirt. Dust spewed from the pits and hung trembling in the air. The machine gun slugs snapped over their backs as Will flattened himself, shrinking from them.

Move! Move! Get it over with!

There was an explosion behind Will and he ducked his head into the collar of his jacket. As particles rattled down on him, he glimpsed Golway, suddenly animated, rising to his knees and crawling rapidly forward, dragging his rifle by the barrel. Before Will, too stunned to respond, could make a move, Tommy was past him and moving into the curtain of dust ahead.

An impulse to run after him surged in Will's mind, but the turmoil in the air above restrained him. He lay there, his teeth clenched in helplessness, knowing what was going to happen.

Golway scrambled on wildly, apparently unseeing, and floundered into a row of sandbags. At that moment the charge there was set off. Tommy screamed in a high woman's voice and leaped to his feet, reeling a bit from the force of the blast.

He took three steps, leaning forward, forward with his arms before his face, and then there was a breaking, popping sound as a bullet struck. He stopped, frozen.

Will watched him stand a moment, and then collapse, spreading on the ground like a half-empty sack of grain.

The roar of sound stopped as if someone had turned a switch. The dust drifted in the quiet wind and olive drab figures, mouths and eyes rimmed with dirt, began to get slowly to their feet.

Will started toward the unmoving form, but a whistle blew and the Sergeant's voice called hoarsely.

"Charlie Company! Fall in here."

Will turned, seeing the Sergeant standing with upraised arm, and walked off the course, almost thankful for the chance to lose his crawling emotions in the anonymity of the Company.

As he took his place in the ranks, he saw an ambulance, marked in red and white, driving off the field. Beyond, Dog Company was entering the trench, preparing for its indoctrination. Polished boots flashed in unison.

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The Ritual

Betty Winn Fuller

THE heavy doors closed noiselessly behind him. The thick carpet whispered quietly beneath his feet. For a moment the sickishly sweet odor of flowers almost overpowered him. As he moved on into the bouquet-banked room opposite, he was conscious of the hushed voices, the covert looks—curious, sanctimonious, the faces composing themselves into uncomfortable masks of sympathy.