

Author of **LEGION**
OF THE DAMNED

REIGN OF HELL

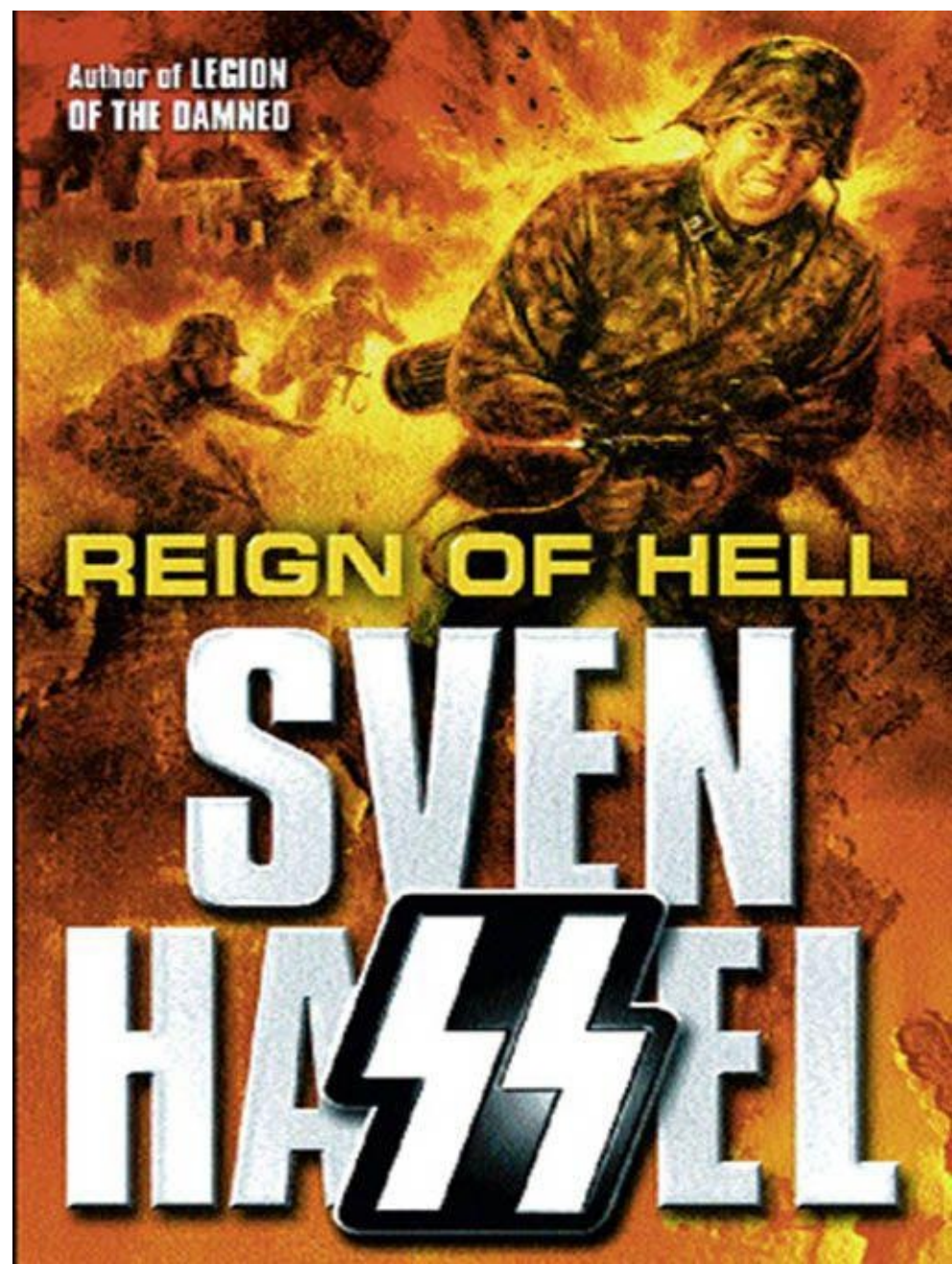
SVEN

HAFTEL

Author of **LEGION
OF THE DAMNED**

REIGN OF HELL

**SVEN
HASSEL**



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Born in 1917 in Fredensborg, Denmark, Sven Hassel joined the merchant navy at the age of 14

~~He did his compulsory year's military service in the Danish forces in 1936 and then, facing unemployment, joined the German army. He served throughout World War II on all fronts except North Africa. Wounded eight times, he ended the war in a Russian prison camp. He wrote LEGION OF THE DAMNED while being transferred between American, British and Danish prisons before making a new life for himself in Spain. His world war books have sold over 53 million copies worldwide.~~

A sudden curtain of silence fell over the burning city. All that could be heard was the steady crackling of the flames, and now and then the sound of falling masonry as yet another building collapsed. The Place Wilson, so lately filled with tanks and soldiers, was now deserted. Blackened fragments of paper fell gently to rest on the burnt-out hulk of a tank where the remains of a German soldier sprawled, half in, half out of the turret.

Down in our basement, we crouched in primitive terror as the wall of silence built up round the city. The sound of warfare we could understand, but no sound at all filled us with a nameless dread . . .

By Sven Hassel

Legion of the Damned

Wheels of Terror

Comrades of War

March Battalion

Assignment Gestapo

Monte Cassino

Liquidate Paris

SS General

Reign of Hell

Blitzfreeze

The Bloody Road to Death

Court Martial

OGPU Prison

The Commissar

‘Why does the Vistula heave and swell, like the breast of a hero Breathing his last on a wild sea shore?’

Why does the waves’ lament, from the dark of the deep abyss, Resound like the sigh of a dying man?’

*‘From out of the depths of the cold river bed, like a sad dream of death
The song is sung.*

*From rain-washed fields the silver willows weep in chorus of sorrow . . .
The young girls of Poland have forgotten how to smile.’*

‘The Germans are without any doubt marvellous soldiers’—

These words were written in his notebook on 21st May 1941
by the future Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke

This book is dedicated to the Unknown Soldier and to all the victims of the Second World War, in the hope that never again will politicians plunge us into the irresponsible lunacy of mass murder.

‘What we want is power. And we have it, we shall keep it. No one shall wrest it from us’—

Speech by Hitler at Munich, 30th November 1933

None of the men of the 5th Company wanted to become a guard Sennelager. But what does it matter what a soldier may or may not want? A soldier is a machine. A soldier is there for the sole purpose of executing orders. Let him make only one slip and he would very soon find himself transferred to the infamous punishment battalion, number 999, the general rubbish tip for all offenders.

Examples are legion. Take, for instance, the tank commander who refused to obey an order to burn down a village and all its inhabitants: court martial, reduction to the ranks, Germersheim, 999 . . . The sequence was swift and inevitable.

Or there again, take the SS Obersturmführer who stood out against his transfer to the security branch: court martial, reduction to the ranks, Torgau, 999 . . .

All examples have a certain dreary monotony. The pattern, once established, could never be altered although after a time they did begin swelling the ranks of the punishment battalions by transferring criminals as well as military offenders.

In Section I, Paragraph 1, of the German Army Regulations can be read the following: ‘Military service is a service of honour’ . . .

And in Paragraph 13: ‘Anyone who receives a prison sentence of more than five months shall be deemed no longer fit for military service and shall henceforth be debarred from serving in any of the armed forces of land, sea or air’ . . .

But in Paragraph 36: ‘In exceptional circumstances Paragraph 13 may be disregarded and men serving prison sentences of more than five months may be enlisted in the Army provided they are sent to special disciplinary companies. Certain of the worst classes of offenders shall be drafted into squads occupied solely with mine disposal or burial duties; such squads not to be supplied with

firearms. After six months' satisfactory service, such men may be transferred to 999 Battalion Sennelager, along with soldiers who have been charged with offences on the field of battle. In time of war, non-commissioned officers must have spent at least twelve months on active service in the front line; in time of peace, ten years. All officers and non-commissioned officers shall be severely reprimanded if found guilty of showing undue leniency towards the men under their command. Any recruit who endures severe discipline without complaint and shows himself fit for military service may be transferred into an ordinary Army regiment and will there be eligible for promotion in the normal way. Before such transfer shall be approved, however, a man must have been recommended for the Cross on at least four occasions following action in the field.'

The number 999 (the three nines, as it was known) was a joke. Or at any rate, supposed to be joke. It must be admitted that Supreme Command at first totally failed to see the humour of it, for the nine hundreds had always been reserved for the special crack regiments. And then someone kindly explained to them that treble nine was the telephone number of Scotland Yard in London. And what could possibly be more subtle or amusing to the Nazi mind than to give the very same number to a battalion composed entirely of criminals? Supreme Command allowed itself a tight bureaucratic smile and nodded its head in sage approval. Let nine-nine-nine be the number; and just for a bit of further fun, why not preface it with a large V with a red line slashed across it? Signifying: annulled. Cancelled. Wipe out . . . Which could, of course, have referred either to Scotland Yard or the battalion itself. But that was the joke of it. That was what was so excruciatingly funny. Either way, it was enough to make you split your sides laughing. For let's face it, the swine who served in 999 battalions were scarcely what you could call desirables. Thieves and cut-throats and petty criminals; traitors and cowards and religious maniacs; the lowest scum of the earth and fit only to die.

Those of us sweating our guts out on the front line, didn't look at it quite like that. We couldn't afford to. Dukes or dustmen, saints or swindlers, all we cared about was whether a chap would share his last fag with you in times of need. To hell with what a man had done before: it was what he did now, right here and now, that mattered to us. You can't exist on your own when you're in the Army. It's every man for another, and the law of good comradeship takes precedence over all else.

The Camp at Sennelager

An ancient locomotive grunted slowly up the line, dragging behind it a row of creaking goods wagons.

On the platform, waiting passengers glanced up curiously as the train drew to a halt. In one of the wagons was a party of armed guards, hung about with enough weaponry to wipe out an entire regiment.

We were sitting on one of the departure platforms, playing a game of pontoon with some French and British prisoners of war. Porta and a Scottish sergeant had between them practically cleared the rest of us out, and Tiny and Gregor Martin had for the past hour been gambling on rather dubious credit. The sergeant was already in possession of four of their IOUs.

We were in the middle of a deal when Lieutenant Löwe, our company commander, suddenly broke up the game with one of his crude interruptions.

‘All right, you lads! Come on, look alive, there! Time to get moving!’

Porta flung down his cards in disgust.

‘Bloody marvellous,’ he said, bitterly. ‘Bloody marvellous, ain’t it? No sooner get stuck into a decent game of cards than some stupid sod has to go and start the flaming war up again. It’s enough to make you flaming puke.’

Löwe shot out his arm and pointed a finger at Porta.

‘I’m warning you,’ he said. ‘Any more of your bloody lip and I’ll—’

‘Sir!’ Porta sprang smartly to his feet and saluted. He never could resist having the last word. He had even talked even the Führer himself to a standstill. ‘Sir,’ he said, earnestly. ‘I’d like you to know that if you find the sound of my voice in any way troublesome I shall be only too happy for the future not to speak unless I am first spoke to.’

Löwe made an irritable clicking noise with his tongue and wisely walked off without further comment. The Old Man rose painfully to his feet and kicked away the upturned bucket on which he had been sitting. He settled his cap on his head and picked up his belt, with the heavy Army revolver in its holster.

‘Second Section, stand by to move off!’

Reluctantly, we shuffled to our feet and looked with distaste at the waiting locomotive and its depressing string of goods wagons. Why couldn’t the enemy have destroyed the wretched thing with their bombs? The prisoners of war, still sprawling at their ease on the ground, laughed up at us.

‘Your country needs you, soldier!’ The Scots sergeant took his half smoked cigarette from his lip and pinched the end between finger and thumb. ‘I’ll not forget you,’ he promised. He waved Tiny his IOUs in a farewell gesture. ‘I’ll be waiting to greet you when you come back.’

‘You know what?’ said Tiny, without rancour. ‘We should have polished your lot off once and for all at Dunkirk.’

The Sergeant shrugged, amiably.

‘Don’t you worry, mate. There’ll be plenty of other opportunities . . . I’ll reserve a place for you when I get to heaven. We’ll pick up the game where we left off.’

‘Not in heaven we won’t,’ said Tiny. ‘Not bleeding likely!’ He jerked a thumb towards the ground. ‘It’s down there for me, mush! You can go where you like, but you’re not getting me up there to meet St Flaming Peter and his band of bleeding angels!’

The Sergeant just smiled and stuffed the IOUs into his pocket. He took out the Iron Cross which he had won from Tiny and thoughtfully polished it on his tunic.

‘Man, just wait till the Yanks get here! It’ll go down a fair treat . . .’

He held the Cross admiringly before him, in joyous anticipation of the price it would fetch. The

Americans were great ones for war souvenirs. There was already a roaring trade in bloodstained bandages and sweaty scraps of uniform. Porta had a large box crammed full with gruesome mementoes, ready for the time when the market would be most favourable. A grisly business, but at least it spelt the beginning of the end as far as the war was concerned.

The locomotive heaved itself and its trail of open wagons to a slow, creaking halt, and we trundled sullenly and resentfully up the platform and into the rain. It had been raining non-stop for four days and by now we were almost resigned to it. We turned up our coat collars and stuck our hands in our pockets and stood with hunched shoulders in a sodden silence. We had recently been issued new uniforms, and the stench of naphthalene was appalling. It could be smelt a mile off on a fine day, and in enclosed quarters it was enough to suffocate you. Fortunately, the lice enjoyed it no more than we did, and they had deserted us *en masse* in favour of the unsuspecting prisoners of war. So at least we were now saved the trouble of constantly having to take a hand out of a pocket to scratch at some inaccessible part of the body.

Painted on the sides of the leading wagons were the already half-forgotten names of Bergen and Trondheim. The wagons were being used for a transport of sturdy little mountain ponies. We paused for a moment to watch them. They all looked quite absurdly alike, with a dark line along the ridge of the back and soft black muzzles. One of them took a fancy to Tiny and began licking his face like a dog, whereupon Tiny, ever ready to adopt the first animal or child that showed him the least affection, instantly decided that the pony was his own personal property and should henceforth travel everywhere with him. He was attempting to separate it from the rest of the herd and lead it out of the wagon, when a couple of armed guards arrived, waving revolvers and yelling at the top of their voices. Seconds later, the combined noise of apoplectic guards, skittish ponies and a viciously swearing Tiny brought Lieutenant Löwe angrily on to the scene.

‘What the hell’s going on here?’ He pushed the guards out of the way, striding into the midst of the mêlée with Danz, the chief guard at Sennelager and the ugliest brute on earth, striding self-importantly at his elbow. Löwe stopped in amazement at the sight of Tiny and his pony. ‘What the devil do you think you’re doing with that horse?’

‘I’m taking him,’ said Tiny. ‘He wants to be with me. He’s my mascot.’ The pony licked him ecstatically, and Tiny placed a proprietary hand about its neck. ‘He’s called Jacob,’ he said. ‘He won’t be any bother. He can travel about with me from place to place. I reckon he’ll soon take to Army life.’

‘Oh, you do, do you?’ Löwe breathed heavily through dilated nostrils. ‘Put that bloody horse back where it belongs! We’re supposed to be fighting a war, not running a circus!’

He stormed off again, followed by Danz, and Tiny stood scowling after him.

‘Sod the lot of ’em!’ said Porta, cheerfully. He took a hand from his pocket and gesticulated crudely in the direction of Löwe’s departing back. ‘Don’t you worry, mate, they’ll be laughing the other side of their ugly officers’ mugs when this little lot’s over . . . whole bloody lot of ’em, they’ll be for the high jump all right and no mistake.’ He turned and cocked an eyebrow at Julius Heide, who was without any doubt at all the most fanatical NCO in the entire German Army. ‘Don’t you reckon?’ he said.

Heide gave him a cold, repressive frown. He disliked all talk of that nature. It gave him shivers up his rigid Nazi spine.

‘More likely the corporals,’ he said, looking hard at Porta’s stripes. ‘More likely the corporals will find their heads rolling.’

‘Oh yeah?’ jeered Porta. ‘And who’s going to round ’em all up, then? Not the bleeding officers, can tell you that for a start. How many of us corporals do you reckon there are in this bleeding Army? A damn sight too many to let themselves be put upon, I can tell you that much.’ He poked his finger into the middle of Heide’s chest. ‘You want to get your facts right,’ he said. ‘You want to open your

eyes and have a look round some time. The cooking pots are already being put on to boil, mate – and it's us what's going to be doing all the cooking, not you and your load of rat-faced officers.'

Heide squared his narrow shoulders.

'Continue,' he said, coldly. 'Go on and hang yourself. I'm making a note of it all.'

Very casually, behind his back, Tiny took a kick at a stray oil drum and lobbed it through the air towards a passing military policeman. The oil drum caught the man on the shoulder, and he spun round in an instant. Silently, Tiny jerked his head towards Heide. The policeman charged forward like a bull elephant. A few years ago, he had probably been directing traffic eight hours a day, out for the blood of parking offenders and careless pedestrians. The war had given him his chance, and now his little moment of glory had come. Before he knew what was happening, Heide found himself up on charge, with Porta sniggering like a cretin and Tiny droning on and on like a tiresome parrot in the background:

'I saw it with my own eyes. I saw him do it. I saw him.'

Lieutenant Löwe dismissed the whole affair with a few short sharp words and an irritable wave of the hand.

'What do you mean, this man attacked you? I don't believe a word of it. I never heard anything so far-fetched in all my life! Sergeant Heide is an excellent soldier. If he'd attacked you, I can assure you that you would not now be alive to tell the tale . . . Get out of my sight before I lose my temper. Go and find something better to do and stop wasting my time.' He screwed up the charge sheet, tossed it contemptuously on to the railway line and turned to look at the Old Man. 'Frankly, I've just about had a bellyful of your section today, Sergeant Beier. We are, I would remind you, supposed to be a tank regiment: not a pack of squabbling half-wits. If you can't keep your men under better control, I shall have to get you transferred elsewhere. Do I make myself quite clear?'

The officer in charge of the convoy which had just arrived now approached the Lieutenant and nonchalantly saluted him with two fingers raised to his cap. He held out a sheaf of papers. He was a busy man. He had a delivery to make – five hundred and thirty prisoners destined for number 99 battalion, Sennelager – and he was anxious to empty the wagons as soon as possible and be on his way. He was already behind schedule, and his next port of call was Dachau, where he had a new load to pick up. Löwe accepted the papers and glanced through them.

'Any casualties *en route*?'

The man hunched a shoulder.

'No way of telling until we get them out and have a look at them . . . We've been travelling for almost a fortnight, so one wouldn't be altogether surprised.'

Löwe raised an eyebrow.

'Where have they come from?'

'Just about everywhere. Fuhlsbüttel, Struthof, Torgau, Germersheim . . . The last lot were picked up from Buchenwald and Borge Moor. If you'll just sign the receipt and let me have it, I'll be getting on my way.'

'Sorry,' said Löwe. 'Quite out of the question.' He smiled rather grimly. 'It's a habit of mine never to sign a receipt until I've checked up on the goods . . . Get the prisoners unloaded and have them lined up on the platform. I'll take a count of heads. Produce for me the correct number and you can have your receipt. But mind this: I don't sign for dead bodies.'

The officer pulled an irritable face.

'Alive or dead, where's the difference? You can't be too fussy after five years of war. You want to see the way we make a delivery to the Waffen SS. Short and snappy. No trouble at all. A nice quick bullet through the back of the neck, and Bob's your uncle! Finished for the day.'

'Very likely,' said Löwe, with his top lip curling distastefully. 'But we are not the Waffen SS. We

are a tank regiment and are supposed to be taking delivery of five hundred and thirty volunteers from the front. Dead men are therefore of no possible use to us. You'll get a receipt for the actual number live prisoners handed over to my sergeants, and if you wish to raise any objections you are quite at liberty to take matters up with the camp commander, the Count von Gernstein. It is entirely up to you.'

The officer pursed his mouth into a thin line and said nothing. Gernstein was not a man anyone with his right senses would ever choose to take matters up with. Rumour had it that he communed with Satan every night from twelve o'clock till four, and he had a reputation for wanton cruelty and viciousness which struck terror to the heart even after five years of bloodshed and slaughter.

The wagons were opened and they vomited out their load of tortured humanity. The guards stood back with dogs and guns, ready to club senseless the first man who stumbled or fell. One poor devil, palsied and trembling, caught up in the general panic yet not strong enough to keep his footing, disappeared beneath a flood of bodies and emerged at the end of the stampede a bloodied mass, his throat torn open by the snarling hounds.

We stood watching as the trembling figures were lined up in three columns. We saw the dead bodies being tossed back into the wagons. The officer in charge strutted down the columns and briskly saluted Löwe.

'All present and correct, Lieutenant. I think you'll find there's no need to waste time on a roll-call.'

Löwe made no reply. He walked in silence the length of the ragged cortège of men, who had been collected from some of the worst hells on earth and confined in communal suffering for the past fourteen days. He waited while a count was taken. Three hundred and sixty-five men out of the five hundred and thirty who had set out on the journey were still alive.

Löwe stood a moment with bent head. He turned at last to the waiting officer.

'I will sign for three hundred and sixty-five men,' he said.

There was a pause. We could feel the tension mounting.

'I beg your pardon,' said the officer, through clenched teeth. 'I believe I have delivered my full quota. The condition of the goods is immaterial. It is the quantity which concerns us.'

Löwe raised an eyebrow.

'Do we deal in human flesh?' he said. 'What is your merchandise? Men or meat?'

Another silence fell. It was broken, none too soon, by the arrival of Gernstein's aide-de-camp Captain von Pehl. His car came to a flamboyant halt a few yards away, and the Captain leapt out smiling benignly upon one and all. He adjusted his monocle and swayed up to the two disputing officers, spurs jingling and gold braid flashing. He clicked his heels together and tapped his polished boots with his riding crop.

'What news on the Rialto, dear sirs? The end of the war? Or merely another bomb in the Führer's bunker?'

Gravely, Löwe explained the situation. The Captain brought his riding crop up to his face and thoughtfully scratched his beautifully-shaven chin with it.

'A slight question of numbers,' he murmured. 'One is expecting a battalion, and one receives scarcely three companies. One can understand the predicament.' He turned pleasantly to the convict officer. 'How, if the question is not too impertinent, dear sir, could you possibly manage to mislay so many men?'

He strolled across to the wagon containing the corpses. He inspected for a moment the top layer, then motioned with his riding crop towards one of the bodies. A couple of guards stepped forward and heaved it on to the platform where it lay in a sawdust heap, a dead man without a head. Von Pehl readjusted his monocle. Gingerly, with a handkerchief held to his nose, he bent over the body and examined it. He straightened up and beckoned to the officer.

‘Perhaps you would be so kind as to show me the point of entry of the bullet, dear sir?’

~~The indignant officer slowly turned crimson. All this absurd amount of fuss over one dead prisoner with a bullet through the back of the head! Did they live in a fool’s paradise, out here at Sennelager?~~

‘The point of entry,’ gently insisted von Pehl. ‘Purely as a matter of interest, I assure you.’

Behind von Pehl stood his ordnance officer, Lieutenant Althaus, with a sub-machine-gun under his arm. Behind Althaus stood a lieutenant of the military police, rocklike and immovable. They were mad, of course. They were all mad. No one in his right mind would have made such a song and dance over one dead prisoner. One dead prisoner, a hundred dead prisoners, what the devil did it matter? There were plenty more where that lot had come from.

‘There was a revolt.’ The officer tilted his chin, in sullen defiance. ‘There was a revolt. The guards had to fire.’

Von Pehl stretched out a languid hand.

‘Report?’

‘I – I haven’t had time to write one out yet.’

Von Pehl tapped his teeth with the handle of his riding crop.

‘So tell me, dear sir – where, exactly, did this – ah – revolt take place?’

‘Just outside Eisenach.’

Eisenach.

It was far enough away, in all conscience. Perhaps now the man would stop poking his interfering Prussian nose into other people’s business and let him get on his way to Dachau for the next batch of human misery.

‘You know, my dear sir,’ murmured von Pehl, ‘that the regulations quite plainly state that any such incident as the one you have mentioned should be reported immediately? Without fail? No matter what?’ He turned to Althaus, standing at his shoulder. ‘Lieutenant, perhaps you would be so good as to telephone at once to the station master at Eisenach?’

We stood patiently waiting in the rain, while von Pehl amused himself by walking up and down looking like a mannequin with a hand on his hip, jangling his spurs and tapping himself with his crop. The officer of the convoy ran a finger round the inside of his collar. Discreetly, his men began to edge away from him. One of the guards, finding himself at my side, spat on the floor and spoke to me out the side of his mouth.

‘I always said he was riding for a fall. Over and over again I’ve said it. The way he treats those prisoners is disgraceful. Absolutely bloody disgraceful. I’ve said so all along.’

Lieutenant Althaus returned, accompanied by the station master, a small squat man wearing a steel helmet just in case things should turn nasty. He held out a jovial plump hand, which von Pehl adroitly managed not to notice without giving any offence. The convoy officer made a rasping sound in the back of his throat.

‘I trust Colonel von Gernstein is keeping well?’ he said.

His attempt at polite conversation fell into a void of stony silence. The station master dropped his hand to his side. Lieutenant Althaus fingered his sub-machine-gun. Von Pehl examined his filthy fingernails. The convoy officer took a step backwards. He should have remained where he belonged, in Budapest, in the Hungarian Army. It was a dangerous game he was playing, gambling on fame and fortune in Nazi Germany.

Von Pehl turned casually to his aide.

‘Well, Lieutenant? What news from Eisenach?’

Eisenach, it seemed, not only had no knowledge of the alleged revolt: they had not even heard of the convoy. I saw a frosty sparkle appear in von Pehl’s cold Prussian eyes. He beckoned to Danz, who charged up like an eager rhinoceros. The Hungarian was arrested on the spot on charges of murder.

submitting a false report and sabotaging a convoy. He was promptly manhandled into a waiting truck and driven off to Sennelager. Lieutenant Löwe duly signed a receipt for the delivery of three hundred and sixty-five volunteers, and the guards, cowed and nervous since the arrest of their officer, withdrew in some disorder. Von Pehl unscrewed his monocle, nodded affably at the assembled volunteers, gave himself one last hearty thwack with his riding crop and mercifully disappeared.

Relief was instantaneous. The tension went out of the atmosphere, cigarettes were lighted, men breathed more easily. Some of the MPs even went so far as to pass round bottles of booze they had recently brought back from France with them, and under the comfortable influence of alcohol we all became blood brothers and rolled off arm in arm to the station canteen to drink each other's health.

The prisoners were given permission to sit down, and some food was passed out. Only dry bread. But even dry bread can be a luxury to a man who has seen the inside of Torgau or Glatz – to anyone who has lived for days on a diet of water in the dark hell of Germersheim, where more people go than have ever come out.

Germersheim . . . It's a name that conjures up fear. It's a place not marked on the map, yet it's easy enough to find your way there. Just leave the motorway near Bruchsal, between Mannheim and Karlsruhe, and drive straight on towards the Rhine. Anyone will tell you the road. It's not difficult to follow. You go through a pretty little village full of jolly cottages with roses round their doors. You take the first turning to the left, and you leave the little village with its cheery cottages and you drive into the cold dark midnight of the forest. And there, on a large signboard, is your first introduction to Germersheim: ENTRY FORBIDDEN, it says, in capital letters a foot high. ENTRY FORBIDDEN MILITARY ZONE. You can drive on for only another half mile or so before the road narrows to a mere track. And that's where you stop, and you thank God and your lucky stars that you're only a sightseer. You can get a good view of the prison from there. A vast grey block of stone straddling like a colossus among the trees. Military Correction Centre, that's what they call it. And if you care to advance any further along the narrow road, and if you manage to escape the armed guards and their dogs, and if you can safely pick your way through the minefield beyond, then they'll no doubt welcome you with open arms, and Germersheim will be your last resting place. Because once you're in, the chances are that you're in to stay. Between 1933 and 1945, one hundred and thirty-three thousand men were swallowed up by Germersheim and never seen again . . .

While the prisoner-volunteers sat smacking the edges of their ragged lips over hunks of bone-hard bread, and while the rest of us lounged about drinking and smoking, Lieutenant Löwe was being regaled by the station master with roast hare. But even eating that delicacy did not put him in a good humour. He marched us out of the station on the double, and not even Porta, dragged away from his pleasant drinking session, saw fit to do more than make an obscene gesture and mutter under his breath.

The arrest of the convoy officer was likely to have tiresome repercussions for Löwe. It would have been simpler by far if the man had accepted a receipt for only three hundred and sixty-five prisoners and there let the matter rest. As it was, the wheels of the military machine had been set in motion and there could be no stopping them now. Colonel von Gernstein was at the moment absent from camp hunting in the mountains. It was common knowledge that whenever he returned from a hunting trip he was in an even more satanic frame of mind than usual. God help the officer who had the temerity to trouble him with affairs such as this present one. And it would certainly be Löwe who was left to lay the matter before him. Everyone else could disclaim responsibility, but in the final analysis it was Löwe's affair and no one else's. He could expect no support from within the camp. Gernstein, second-in-command, who had lost an arm during the early years of the war and tended to make capital out of it, always took the opportunity to report sick on such occasions; and the next in the chain inevitably managed to put in a few days' leave at the right moment. All in all, it would have been f

less bother if the Lieutenant had followed normal Sennelager procedure and shot the wretched Hungarian on the spot.

We marched mutinously, infected by the Lieutenant's ill-humour and harangued on all sides by bawling NCOs. Non-commissioned officers in the Prussian Army spent their entire lives, from the cradle to the grave, shouting themselves hoarse on the principle that the more noise one makes, the more likely one is to be obeyed. On the whole, men grew so accustomed that they never even noticed it any more, but still the NCOs went on shouting. It was, by this time, probably a reflex action. Not even the prisoners, straggling and stumbling in our midst, took any notice of the threats and curses that accompanied us.

About six miles off from camp, some of them began to flag pretty badly. Löwe yelled at them to keep in line, but they were past it, they were dropping down like flies and lying in heaps at the side of the road. Not even the frenzied clubbing of the guards could bring them to their feet. Löwe was forced to call a halt and give them a breathing space. He stood before them in the pouring rain and delivered one of his pep talks, to which I listened with growing fascination.

'You are all volunteers, you men. No one has forced you to come here – but now that you are here by God, you're going to be treated like soldiers!'

The volunteers, beaten, starved and systematically brutalised, shivered in their prison garb and kept their heads bent low and their shoulders hunched. I wondered if the Lieutenant really could be so naïve as to believe what he was saying. Or whether for the sake of his conscience he had had to force himself to believe it. I wondered what his definition of a volunteer was. When threatened with execution on the one hand or 999 battalion on the other, could any man really be said to have had freedom of choice?

The column formed up once again. We set off in good marching order along the asphalt road, with Löwe at the head and Lieutenant Komm at his side. Komm had lost an arm at the front, and now marched with the thumb of his false hand tucked into his belt. We had barely covered half a mile when the prisoners began to falter again. They were whipped on from behind by the prison guards encouraged by the manic vociferations of Danz, who I swear could have made a corpse stand up and dance if he had been so inclined. Inside the column, Tiny lumbered up and down his section like a sheepdog with a herd of stupid sheep, exhorting them to keep in line and not to drop down dead before they reached Sennelager. I suddenly saw him pause, and give a joyous shout, and club one of the prisoners affectionately in the chest. I thought at first that he'd met up with one of his old mates from days gone by, but the prisoner, an ugly giant of a man almost as large as Tiny himself, appeared not to know him. He screwed up his little piggy eyes in puzzlement.

'Corporal?'

'You remember me!' roared Tiny, giving him another affectionate punch in the middle of the chest. The man staggered slightly. 'Lutz!' shouted Tiny. 'It's my old friend Lutz!'

'I think,' said the man, nervously, 'that you must be mistaken. Perhaps you may have confused me with another—'

'Paris!' bawled Tiny, throwing open his arms. 'Paris, that's where it was! Gay Paree and all the rest of it, and you having the time of your life, shafting a different bird every night of the week . . . It had to be a different bird, didn't it, Lutz? Do you remember that? It always had to be a different one on account of they was never there the next day . . . A quick jump with a nice bit of Jewish cunt before popping her into the oven to roast . . . That's what it used to be, didn't it, Lutz? You remember that, don't you, Lutz? Those were the days, eh? Those were the days, weren't they, Lutz? When you was in the Gestapo and all the rest of us had to bow and scrape and lick your bleeding arsehole—'

'Corporal, you're making a terrible mistake!' said the man, with the sweat pouring in glistening grey drops off his forehead. 'I've never been to Paris – never in my life – never, I swear it!'

‘Next you’ll be telling me you’ve never had a woman!’ jeered Tiny. He suddenly whipped his knife out of his boot and held it within centimetres of the man’s throat, half choking him with an arm tight round his neck as they marched. ‘I’m going to make a soldier out of you, Lutz. From now on, I’m going to take you under my wing. I’m going to see to it that you’re the best bleeding soldier in the whole bleeding Army. I’m not going to know a moment’s peace until I’ve got you right out there at the front, fighting mad with half your head blown off . . . You understand me, Lutz? You understand me, do you?’ The terrified man nodded his head and almost slit his throat open on the gleaming edge of Tiny’s knife. Tiny slowly relaxed. He slipped the knife back into his boot. ‘All right, so tell me, Lutz,’ he said, sounding quite affable once again. ‘Tell me how much you weigh?’

Lutz swallowed so hard I thought his Adam’s apple was going to come shooting out the top of his head.

‘A hundred and twenty-five kilos, Corporal.’

‘A hundred and twenty-five kilos?’ said Tiny, horrified. ‘Christ almighty, you’re lucky you’re alive! They been feeding you rich food, have they?’ He gripped the man’s arm, affectionately. ‘Don’t you worry, mate, we’ll soon shift that lot for you. Good stiff diet of bread and water and lots of nice healthy exercise round and round the courtyard . . . You’ll be all right, chum, we’ll have you down to weight in thirty in next to no time. The Sylph of Sennelager, that’s what you’ll be known as by the time I’ve finished with you . . .’

About half a mile off camp, Löwe ordered another short rest. The prisoners collapsed on to the waterlogged ground. The rest of us squatted on our haunches or tried to find a bit of shelter in the ditch at the side of the road. From now on we should be under constant observation from the camera and it was essential we finish the march in good order. We were whipped back into line and set off yet again.

‘Sing!’ ordered Löwe, and obediently we sang.

We swung into camp like a crack Prussian regiment rather than the rough vagabond mob that we were. There was always an unpleasant possibility, with Colonel von Gernstein, that he would sneak back unexpectedly twenty-four hours before he was due and start poking and prying and generally pushing his nose in where it was least wanted. For all we knew, he could be spying on us at that very moment with his field-glasses. He had done it before, and we had learned through harsh experience that he had an eagle eye for spotting even the smallest disciplinary shortcoming.

We came to a halt outside First Company block and the new recruits were left to freeze in the open air and the lashing rain for a further two hours. At that point Staff-Sergeant Hofmann decided to wander out and take a look at them.

Hofmann wore the black uniform of the tank corps, though to our knowledge had never set foot in a tank in his life. His bible was the Staff Sergeants’ Manual, which he carried with him everywhere. He was so attached to it that to have removed it from him would have been tantamount to putting a bullet through the man’s heart. He now moved slowly down the straggling column of volunteers, taking his time, subjecting each man to a long, penetrating stare. As he reached the last of the line, he sorrowfully shook his head with the air of one who has the cares of the entire world upon his shoulders.

‘Monkeys!’ he said, witheringly. ‘They send me a load of gibbering monkeys and expect me to make men out of them!’

He trod heavily up the steps and planted himself at the top of the flight, legs apart and flanked on either side by a respectful minion. He looked down, kinglike, upon his miserable band of victims.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘All right, I’ve been lumbered with you, so that’s my hard luck. It’s enough to make a cat puke, but I’m not complaining – and neither are you, if you know what’s good for you. Open your mouths too wide and it could start growing very unhealthy round here. Very unhealthy.’ He

swayed slightly forward and tried a balancing act on the balls of his feet. He had seen the Colonel do many times, but it turned out to be not quite as easy as it looked. He rocked back heavily on to his heels and jarred his spine. 'From now on,' he bellowed, 'you've only got one guardian angel round here, and that's me . . . Your lives are in my hands, and don't you ever forget it. If I decide you're not worth the air you're breathing, then that's that. That's your lot. You've had it. OK?' He placed his hands on his hips. 'You with me?'

His flock bleated in chorus, nodding their weary heads in acknowledgment of his absolute power. What else, poor sheep, could they do? Many of them had been soldiers before – some among them had even been generals – and not even in their most hideous dreams could they have imagined a reception such as this. The nine-nine-nine battalion was notorious, but never before had a reality turned out to be so much more ghastly than the anticipation. It must have seemed to them at that moment that this, after all, was the meaning of the phrase, a fate worse than death.

Hofmann swept on with his speech of welcome.

'As from today, Company 15 will be attached to the Seventh Tank Regiment – and all I can say is God help the lot of us. It makes me sick to my stomach, it gives me a pain right down in the guts to think that the German Army is going to be contaminated by vermin like you lot.' He shifted his position and glared down at them scornfully. 'I'm not complaining,' he said. 'I'm just letting you know how I feel. I shouldn't like there to be any misunderstanding in the future.'

Gratefully, they mouthed their thanks for this act of generosity.

'Here in Sennelager,' Hofmann went on, 'it doesn't matter what you've done in the past, it doesn't matter who you were or what you were, a bleeding general or a bleeding road-sweeper. From this moment on you're all equal. You're all scum. You're all grovelling in the same patch of mud together and you can consider yourselves lucky that the Führer's a damn sight more soft-hearted than I am 'cos if I had my way you'd go straight off to the slaughterhouse where you belong.' He glanced down at a sheet of paper he was holding. 'I see we have two generals among us – two generals, one colonel and a couple of cavalry captains. That's nice. That's really nice. I like a bit of quality. It raises the tone of the establishment. It makes me feel good when I see a general down on his hands and knees cleaning out the shithouse. It makes me feel really gratified. It—'

Hofmann suddenly broke off in mid-sentence. From the corner of his eye he had caught sight of Sergeant Wolf leaning against a lamp-post, with his dogs, listening to his discourse. Wolf had a sardonic smile on his face. Even the dogs seemed to be grinning. Hofmann's cheeks began to mottle. Wolf was one of his biggest bugbears. He could never quite decide which one he hated most, Porta or Wolf. Generally it was Porta, but at this moment it was Sergeant Wolf. He turned to him irritably.

'What are you lounging about for? Can't you find anything better to do with your time?'

Wolf's smile broadened into a grin. One of the dogs began to slowly thump its tail.

'I'm just enjoying myself,' said Wolf. 'I always appreciate a good comedy show.' He prised himself apart from the lamp-post. 'Who writes your scripts?' he inquired. 'They'd pay you good money for them in civvy street. Have 'em laughing till the tears ran down their legs.'

Hofmann's face swelled up like an overripe tomato. To humiliate a Prussian sergeant before a group of reprieved criminals! What on earth was the war coming to?

'Sergeant Wolf,' he said, with as much dignity as he was still able to muster. 'I shall make it my business to report those remarks. You have gone out of your way deliberately to insult the honour of a non-commissioned officer.'

'Honour?' said Wolf. 'What honour?' He shook his head. 'Forget it, chum, you don't have a leg to stand on. Remember what Ludendorff said? Honour doesn't exist below the rank of lieutenant . . . stick that up your backside and chew it over!'

He wandered amiably away, with his two hounds ambling at his heels. Hofmann turned angrily back

to his flock. He surveyed them through slatted lids, searching their faces for the least sign of a grin or a smirk, but they stared back at him with bleak, blank-eyed devotion. Their guardian angel. Their lives were in his hands. They could not afford to be amused.

‘Right,’ said Hofmann. ‘All right. That brings me to my next point. Chalked up on a slate in my office there’s a list of rules and regulations. Do’s and don’ts. Mostly don’ts. Learn them by heart. Your life depends on them. I got eyes in the back of my head and I got eyes in the cheeks of my arse. Nothing goes on round here what I don’t know about. Anyone tries stepping out of line and he’s a dead man. Do I make myself clear?’

The choir hastened to assure him that he did, and Hofmann seemed satisfied at last that he had sufficiently bent them to his will. He dismissed them contemptuously and they stumbled inside, out into the rain, and collapsed in sodden heaps of boneless flesh on to their mattresses. There they stayed unfed, unwashed, in their soaking clothes until morning.

Life at Sennelager, if it could properly be called life, began at four a.m. with jackboots crashing down the corridors. Piercing whistles and raucous shouts completed the awakening of anyone who could manage to sleep through the sound of endless doors being kicked open. A German NCO never approaches a door in the usual way. He never turns a handle and walks into a room as any normal, sane person might do. To him, a door represents an irresistible challenge. It is kicked, it is battered, it is assaulted with venom. That is what a door is there for. The greatest ambition of every NCO worth his salt is to kick a door right off its hinges at one blow. As Porta always used to say, ‘In the eyes of God and the Prussian Army, nothing is impossible’ . . .

At four o’clock in the morning, therefore, Sennelager’s very foundations trembled and shook beneath the onslaught. Not even Porta could train himself to sleep through it. Soldiers everywhere were hurled to the floor, and barely five minutes later every bed was a model of perfection. Such was the discipline of the place.

In the officers’ quarters, the Colonel could be seen each morning doing his exercises to the strains of military music. He had a regular set of rigorous movements which were followed with Prussian precision day after day. He always ended up with a ride on the mechanical horse accompanied by the ‘March of the 18th Hussars.’

For us, the common riff-raff fighting for existence in the overcrowded barrack rooms, it was a somewhat different picture. Splayed feet attached to skeletal legs wavered across the stone floor in search of a square inch of standing space at the washbasins. Bare toes were crushed underfoot. Men jostled and swore, and NCOs strode about in their midst adding to the confusion.

Everything was always in confusion. Too many men trying to be in too many places at exactly the same time, and everything done at the double. I think I scarcely ever saw anyone walk anywhere at Sennelager. Wherever you went, you went at the trot. After a while, it became instinctive. It was a race for survival, and the slowest went to the wall.

‘Get a move on, there! Pick those bloody feet up! What do you think this is, Spastic blood Sunday?’

It went on all the time. It got to be so ingrained in a man that after a while he’d find he was even disciplining himself in the same way as he went about his business:

‘Get a move on, there! Pick those bloody feet up! What do you think this is, Spastic blood Sunday?’

One of the worst of the NCOs at Sennelager was Helmuth, the Fifth Company cook. He was one of the world’s natural bullies and arsehole creepers. What trash the Gestapo recruited for their stooge pigeons. It was Helmuth who quite gratuitously threw a can of boiling coffee over Fischer, one of the mildest, softest-spoken and best-intentioned men ever to arrive in 999 battalion. It was probably the very mildness that provoked the attack. I’ve noticed before that people of Helmuth’s ilk can’t stand

the meek and the humble. Poor Fischer. He'd been a minister before coming to the hell at Sennelager. He had innocently imagined that being a servant of God would afford him some kind of divine protection, and he had stood up in the pulpit and denounced Adolf Hitler and the Nazi régime to the congregation which had discreetly vanished before the end of the sermon. That same night, the bogeymen in their leather coats had come and taken him away. Parson Fischer had then commenced upon a series of experiences for which none of his bible reading could possibly have prepared him. It had begun at Bielefeldt and it had continued at Dachau, in the special torture wing reserved for men who had offended God. The worst of it all had been when they arrested his wife and three children and held them as hostages. Dachau had been nothing compared to that.

Now they had sent him to Sennelager and men like Helmuth were pouring boiling coffee over his fingers for the sheer joy of hearing him scream. Fischer, not unnaturally, jerked his scalded hands away, dropping his tin mug as he did so. A torrent of liquid cascaded on to the brightly shining boots of Sergeant Helmuth. Poor Fischer. With a little more experience he would have stood his ground and let himself be scalded to the very bone, if necessary. It would have been worth it, for the days of blessed peace and quiet it would have earned him in the infirmary. But Fischer was green. He had not yet learnt how to control his reflexes. He acted exactly as Helmuth had predicted. In the startled silence which followed, Helmuth picked up one of his big iron coffee pots and brought it crashing down on Fischer's head. We stood and watched, and none of us said a word. It was typical Sennelager behaviour. Hold your tongue at all times. There was nothing to be gained by speaking out. We might have hated Helmuth, but who after all was Parson Fischer? Merely one new arrival among three hundred others. No one was going to risk his life for an unknown preacher.

Helmuth banged down the coffee pot. He came out from behind his table and indicated his spattered footwear.

'Come on, parson! Down on your knees and do a bit of praying! Lick my boots with your holy tongue and let's have a bit of real humility for a change . . .'

Fischer sank slowly to the ground, and I found it difficult to imagine how he was ever going to get up again. He was an old man of sixty, broken and bent by the treatment meted out to him at Bielefeldt and Dachau, and his will to live must have been strong indeed to have carried him this far. He craned his skinny neck forward. It looked like a length of perished hosepipe. Slowly and painfully, his tongue approached the toe of Helmuth's right boot. It was a spectacle we had witnessed so many times before that we had ceased to find it degrading. We had all been put through it at some stage or another in our Army careers. You soon learned how to swallow your disgust. You had to if you wanted to survive. But it was always difficult, the first time. I hadn't found it too easy myself, as a raw recruit in the 7th Uhlans, ordered to lick a horse's hooves every morning for a week. It wasn't surprising that Fischer was making such heavy weather of it. He wasn't helped any by a kick in the teeth from Helmuth. He fell backwards, spitting out blood and pieces of bone, and as he did so Helmuth brought the heavy coffee pot crashing down again on his skull. That was the end of the fun for that morning. Helmuth had overdone things as usual, and yet another victim was carted off unconscious to the infirmary to live or die as the doctors saw fit. Die, in all probability. An old man like that wasn't much use to anyone. 'Fell down a flight of stone steps due to under-nourishment in previous place of detention'. By the time the report reached the previous place of detention, and by the time they had solemnly and righteously denied the charge and the papers had been rubber-stamped and copied in duplicate and triplicate and finally mislaid in the bowels of some conveniently far-flung cabinet, the victim would have been dead and dumped so long ago that no one would have been able to remember what he had looked like.

After the music-hall comedy of Helmuth and Fischer, we turned out for the euphemistically labelled 'Morning Sports Session'. Never a day passed but some unfortunate devil who couldn't stand the pain

was kicked or punched to death and carried off on a stretcher. Sports session at Sennelager was an endurance test that would have defeated most Olympic athletes in full training. But when death is the only alternative, it's amazing what feats a half-starved body can be forced to perform.

At the end of an hour, with black spots leaping in crazy patterns before the eyes, blood like a cataract pounding in the ears, lungs heaving and ribs strained to breaking point, the survivors were sent off at the double to pick up their uniforms and arms from a communal dump. Boots, jackets, trousers, caps, they were flung about at random and it was each man for himself to grab what he could. The idea was to get one of everything in as short a time as possible and to hell whether or not it was the right size. It was the boots that were the most important. A man could survive with a jacket which scarcely met across the chest, he could hitch his trousers up under the armpits, but if he found himself with a boot a couple of sizes too small, he was really in trouble. One poor bastard I knew once found himself with two right feet. After only half an hour on the march, he passed out, while some silly son of a bitch somewhere must have been tramping about quite happily with a big left boot on a small right foot and never even noticed the difference.

The same morning that Parson Fischer fell foul of Helmuth, we had another bit of excitement with the Jehovah's Witness. It was his first day in camp and he caused quite a pleasurable stir when he refused point-blank to put on a uniform. His mate – an ex-housebreaker, as I subsequently discovered – did his best to coax him into it, but the chap stood his ground and they couldn't budge him. It seemed he had some sort of religious objections to uniforms in general and the German Army uniform in particular. Someone asked him why he'd come to Sennelager in the first place if he had no intention of becoming a soldier. It turned out that like so many others he'd had no alternative. It was either volunteering to fight for the Fatherland or standing by to watch while they strung up his crippled brother. Naturally, he volunteered. But now that he was here, not wild dogs nor Prussian NCOs could force him into wearing that uniform.

They threw a pile of clothes at him, but he let it fall to the ground, only picking up the green working overalls. The rest of it, the grey overcoat, the steel helmet, the cap, the cartridge belt, the rifle, the gas mask and all the other thousand and one bits and pieces we were supposed to hump about with us, he left in a heap where they had fallen. Simply rolled up the overalls, stuffed them under his arm and set off towards the stairs. The Quartermaster-Sergeant stuck his big red head through the hatch and stared with bulldog eyes at the discarded pile of arms and uniform. I thought for one delightful moment that he was about to burst a main artery. He caught my hopeful gaze upon him, and sadly tapped his head with a finger.

'Now I've seen the lot,' he said. 'So help me, I never thought the day would come when they'd start opening up the bleeding loony bins and recruiting the nuts.'

He came to the door and bawled across the room at the legs of the Jehovah's Witness as they disappeared up the stairs.

'Hey, you! You with the bleeding halo! Where in hell's name do you think you're going?'

The man paused at the head of the stairs. Slowly, he turned back to look at the outraged sergeant. Before he could say anything in reply, Sergeant-Major Matho came lumbering up with all his usual doglike devotion. Any duty which might possibly involve a few quick karate chops or a kick in the guts delighted him.

'What's going on, Sergeant? What's all the noise about? Who's making trouble?'

The Sergeant pointed an accusing finger.

'We've got a bleeding nutter on our hands. Thinks he's already flapping about heaven playing pat-a-cake with the angels. Says he doesn't want to put his uniform on.'

The Jehovah's Witness clicked his heels together.

'Only the overalls,' he said. 'I have no objections to wearing the overalls.'

‘No objections to wearing the OVERalls?’ repeated Sergeant-Major Matho, outraged.

The whole room had by now come to a standstill. In all my years in the German Army, I had never met anything quite like it. I began to have a sneaking respect for Jehovah’s Witnesses. They might have belonged to the lunatic fringe, but it seemed they could hold their own with a Prussian NCO.

‘No objections to the OVERalls, did you say?’ Matho suddenly picked up the discarded greatcoat and shook it as he would a rat. ‘What’s the matter with the rest of the uniform? Don’t you like the colour or something? Don’t you care for the cut of it? Great balls of fire!’ He tossed the coat back on the floor and sent it flying across the room with one almighty kick. ‘What do you think this is, a Parisian bleeding fashion show? You’re here to fight a war, not ponce about the place complaining the clothes don’t suit you! You’re willing enough to sit on your great fat arse all day long, guzzling the Führer’s bread and sausages, and then you have the bloody nerve to start grizzling and bloody moaning because you don’t like the look of the bloody uniform!’

‘Sergeant, it’s not the look of it. It’s the whole principle of warfare.’ The Jehovah’s Witness turned earnestly to face the enraged Matho. ‘I happen to be a Christian. Thou shalt not kill . . . I am forbidden by my faith to take up arms or to wear a uniform. It is as simple as that.’

The man turned to go. Matho was up those stairs behind him so fast his hair started to singe. He grabbed him by the shoulder, spun him round and gave him a kick in the backside which sent him crashing over the railings and headfirst to the ground. Swiftly and silently, the room was vacated. We knew only too well what was coming next. We had no desire to stand and watch. We herded like cattle into the corridor outside. Behind that closed door, in the room that stank of musk and dust and human sweat, the grim scene was played to its inevitable conclusion. We heard Matho’s voice rising to a hysterical shriek, cursing the bible, the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the church in general. We heard his victim’s replies, low but clear:

‘I cannot help it. I am a Christian. I will not take up arms, I would rather die.’

And we knew, and he knew that he would never come out of that room alive.

We heard Matho unclasping his heavy leather belt and doubtless shoving the buckle under the man’s nose as he said the familiar, meaningless words: ‘Gott mit uns.’

God was with us. The Holy German Army and the Sainted Führer fed his ungrateful children bread and sausages, and still this maniac stood his weak snivelling ground and refused to fight.

We heard the first loud crack of leather as the belt whipped out and lashed its buckle across the victim’s face. It wasn’t only Matho, there were half a dozen other sergeants there to help him in his task. They took it in turns, competing among themselves to see who could cause the most damage, who could produce the longest and the loudest scream of agony. It took almost thirty minutes before blessed silence fell at last over the room and we knew that the suffering had finished. There was only a lifeless form left for them to kick around the floor. Now they could not inflict any more of their insupportable tortures. They opened the doors and called us in to dispose of the body. There was an eye hanging out of its socket half-way down a cheek. There was a scarlet pulp where the nose had been. The mouth was torn to shreds and the gums split open. We picked up the remnants of vainglorious humanity and threw it out of the window. After the floor was mopped, we continued with the business of the day.

It was all quite normal and in order. Just one more dead body to be picked up and buried in a nameless grave. He probably died under the influence of drink. Fell out of the window in an alcohol stupor. It was amazing the number of inmates at Sennelager who fell out of windows in alcohol stupors. It happened every day of the week – nothing to write home about. His wife, if he had a wife, would wear out her shoe leather traipsing from one bureaucratic blimp to another. But no one would be able to give her any satisfactory answers. Probably no one would even try. People were disappearing all the time in the German Army. Who should trouble his head about one murdered Jehovah’s Witness?

We put the matter from our minds and went along to hear the Captain make his traditional speech ~~welcome to the newcomers – or what was left of the newcomers.~~ Fischer was in the infirmary and the Jehovah's Witness was dead, and God knows how many more had expired during the night or would vanish during the course of the day.

'You are here,' said the Captain, with his pleasant smile, 'by the grace of God and the Führer. This is your chance to repent and be forgiven. To wipe out the sins of the past and to start again with a clean slate. It is our job, here at Sennelager, to train you to be good and useful soldiers: it is your job to co-operate with us and to show your willingness to serve the Führer as loyal citizens of the Fatherland. There are several ways in which you can do this. Just to give you one example, you may volunteer for special missions when you reach the front line . . . Naturally,' he concluded, with a deprecating movement of one elegant hand, 'we shall expect rather more from you than from your fellow-soldiers. This is only natural. This is only right and proper. You have a past to atone for, and you—'

'Sir!'

A big, burly chap, who, as rumour had it, had been a successful pimp in Berlin before the war, shot up his hand and interrupted the Captain in his full flow of eloquence.

'Sir!'

The Captain allowed himself only a faint wrinkling of his alabaster brow by way of showing his displeasure.

'Yes, my man? What is it?'

The jolly pimp sprang to his feet. He must have known as well as anyone that the chances of survival in 999 battalion were pretty remote. He had nothing to lose by making a nuisance of himself and annoying the Captain.

'Sir, can I ask a question?' he said.

'Of course you can,' said the Captain, smoothing out the wrinkles from his brow. 'Ask whatever you like. Just try not to take all day about it.'

The man's question was really very simple. He wanted to know what would happen if a criminal such as himself had his head blown off while he was fighting for the Führer and proving himself a good and loyal citizen of the Fatherland. Would it atone for his past misdemeanours? Would he then be deemed worthy of re-entering the Army as a fully-accredited soldier?

He asked his question in a tone of the most earnest sincerity. A genuine seeker after knowledge. Eager and willing to have his head blown off for the Führer and the Fatherland, so long as he could only be assured that it would reinstate him in the eyes of the Army.

No one dared to laugh, or even so much as smile. Hofmann's glittering eyes were everywhere at once, but he encountered only a most solemn silence. It seemed as if everybody was hanging in mid-air awaiting the captain's reply to this most burning of questions.

The Captain tapped his boots impatiently with his riding crop.

'My dear man, if one dies like a hero, then naturally one is treated like a hero . . . Full provision is made for such a contingency. Article 226 of the Penal Code states quite clearly that anyone falling on the field of battle is granted an automatic pardon. You need have no fears on that score. I trust I have answered your question and set your mind at rest?'

'Oh yes, indeed, sir. You have indeed, sir. I just wanted to make quite sure that I knew what I was doing before I went and did it.' The man smiled, cheerfully. 'Didn't want to cook my goose; sir, without knowing whether I'd still be alive to eat it afterwards . . . If you see what I mean, sir?'

Over in his corner, Hofmann had taken out his notebook and pencil and was scribbling rapidly. Tirpitz opened his mouth the merest crack and slid his words out sideways like a second-rate ventriloquist.

'Shouldn't care to be in your shoes, mate . . . you've not only cooked your bleeding goose, you'

gone and burnt it to a bleeding frazzle!’

~~The days that followed were tough and brutal, as was the normal pattern of Sennelager, and five~~ more of our volunteers came to grief. One collapsed and died on a route march; one failed to move fast enough when a grenade went off by mistake; and three others panicked at their first encounter with a tank during a training period and were promptly run down and churned to mincemeat to serve as an example to others.

Shortly afterwards, there were several abortive attempts at desertion. Every single man who tried was recaptured within the first six hours and brought back to Sennelager to be handed over to Lieutenant-Colonel Schramm, the camp executioner.

Schramm was a butcher merely by force of circumstances. Neither by temperament nor by talent was he fitted for the task. He had lost a leg under a tank at Lemberg, which had effectually ended his active career as a soldier. And instead of promoting him to a full colonel and giving him a comfortable job behind an anonymous desk, the authorities, with their malicious wisdom, had seen fit to reward him for his services by posting him to Sennelager. The first execution carried out under his command had given him a shock from which he never fully recovered. By the third and fourth he felt that he was losing his reason. But he had a wife and three young children, and he knew what both their fate and his would be should he refuse to obey orders. So he took to the bottle and had been drinking steadily ever since. He drank before executions to steady his nerves and come to terms with his conscience; he drank during executions to give himself the courage to go through with it; and he drank after executions to forget what he had just done. Since executions ran at the rate of three batches per week, it may be surmised that the Lieutenant-Colonel was very rarely observed to be sober. He used to limp round the camp using his sabre as a walking stick, never saying a word to a soul. Frequently on execution days it happened that he was too drunk to move without support and had to be escorted there and back by the execution squad. No one would ever have dreamt of reporting him to the Camp Commander. Schramm was regarded with pitying contempt, and yet was a general favourite among all the men.

Whenever you saw him in the blurred grey light of early morning, limping across the courtyard with his flask of kummel in his hand, you could be sure that an execution had been arranged. He used always to snatch a few minutes’ extra drinking time at a point mid-way between the ammunition stores and the officers’ mess, where he was safely out of sight of von Gernstein and his prying binoculars. He would sit down on a low wall, rest his chin on the hilt of his sabre, and stare into space, thinking God knows what uncomfortable thoughts before pushing his flask back into his pocket and hobbling on his way with his artificial leg creaking with every step. When he arrived at the camp prison he was inevitably offered a large glass of beer; which just as inevitably he accepted. Some time later he would appear with the firing squad and make for the courtyard where the executions took place.

Once an execution was over, he obliterated all traces of the victims from his memory. There was a story told in the camp, and we all believed it, of how the Adjutant had asked him one night in the officers’ mess ‘what sort of show the General had put up?’

‘General?’ said Schramm, looking bewildered. ‘What general?’

‘The one you shot this morning, old boy,’ said the Adjutant. ‘Major-General von Steinklotz.’

‘Von Steinklotz?’ said Schramm. ‘I shot Major-General von Steinklotz?’

He plainly thought he must be suffering from drunken delusions. Amid roars of delighted laughter he finished off his kummel, staggered out of the mess and fell flat on his face. He was taken home by his wife by a couple of sympathetic lance-corporals, who undressed him and put him to bed without his ever knowing a thing about it.

On two occasions at least he attempted suicide. The first time he hanged himself from the rafters

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