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"Long Past Glory"

by Thompson Girl

"Make sure you save a bullet."

The words make no sense, but Kirby doesn't care. The voice is American, and that's what's important. The voice is a guide through the smoke that chokes the air, a beacon to latch onto between the shattering concussions of German artillery pounding the front lines.

"The push will come when the barrage ends."

He homes in on the speaker, turning clumsily. Littlejohn's arm lies across his shoulders, and the weight of the wounded man falls more on Kirby with each step as Littlejohn fights a losing battle to stay conscious. Kirby tightens his grip around Littlejohn's waist, tries to lever him more upright. The smoke blinds the B.A.R man, coats his throat, and makes him cough.

"Who's there?" It's the same man's voice, calling warningly into the pall of smoke and dust.

"Don't shoot! I'm an American!" Kirby shouts. "I need help."

Two men loom out of the swirls in front of him, and Littlejohn's weight vanishes as the GIs each take one of the wounded man's arms and half-carry, half-drag him to a foxhole nearby. Another shell explodes, and Kirby dives after them, arms thrown over his head.

Three strangers huddle with him, the two privates who had helped him bring in Littlejohn, and a sergeant. Their faces are nearly unrecognizable as human beneath the sweaty grime and beards, their uniforms as muddy as their foxhole. Kirby knows he looks no better. It's the whites of their eyes that stand out, eerily disembodied in the thick smoke. The sergeant pushes close enough to be heard during the lulls of the barrage. "Where's your platoon, Private?"

Kirby recognizes the throaty tenor voice. This is the man whose voice he has been following to safety. "Got separated," Kirby says. He crawls around the three men to Littlejohn, rips out a compress bandage and sulfa. "Trying to find a medic."

"Should've held your position," the sergeant reprimands him. "You know that."

"If we'd'a stayed there, we'd be dead!" Kirby retorts. He jerks the bandage tight. Littlejohn moans. "Our foxhole's nothing but a big hole in the ground, and not the kind we coulda dug either."

They duck again as another 88 shell blasts the earth. Debris splatters them.

The sergeant asks, "What's your name?"

"Kirby."

"I'm Sergeant Kirchofer. That's Martin and Bleeker."

"Sergeant Kirchofer? Of the 9th?" Kirby can't keep the surprise out of his voice, though he's not sure whether it's surprise or awe or a little bit of both.

The man smiles, but there's no humor in it. "That's me."

For a moment, Kirby's at a loss for words. Kirchofer and his squad are famous, or infamous, depending on how you look at it. From North Africa through Sicily to Utah Beach... Kirby has always assumed they couldn't be real, their impossible survival through some of the worst battles just the stuff of embellished fireside tales. That true long-time survivors would either have cracked a long time ago and been sent Stateside or been promoted so high a private like Kirby would never meet one... or they'd be like Saunders, their battles and memories left untold, unrewarded, festering behind quiet competence in the shadows of their souls.

Silence abruptly replaces the explosions. A long, drawn-out moment of uncanny stillness stretches all along the lines as the Americans crouch and wait, wondering if that's really the end of the German barrage, or if there's still more. Kirchofer lifts his rifle, checks it again, then rests it beside him and pulls out his Colt .45. Looks at it, then at the other two soldiers with him. "This might be it."

The three men share a look that excludes Kirby.

"Might be what?" Kirby asks, unable to resist.

"The Germans," Kirchofer says quietly. "They've softened us up long enough. Now they throw everything at us."

It's nothing Kirby doesn't know already, and he wonders if that's really what the men are talking about. "Annnh, we got three companies holding the line," he says, wondering who he's trying to reassure.

"You haven't seen the recon photos," Kirchofer answers as he watches out across the coming battlefield. "You haven't seen what we're up against. We don't stand a chance this time."

The sergeant believes that, Kirby can hear it in his voice. For a second, Kirby is nonplussed. He's heard a lot of guys panicking that this was it, they were going to die, but this is somehow different. Some grim certainty pervades the sergeant's declaration, and it unsettles Kirby. Maybe he does know something Kirby doesn't. The B.A.R. man forces himself to shrug and laugh it off. "Well, if so, I'm in good company with you three heroes."

The three men exchange another glance that isn't at all what Kirby expects. No pride, no gung-ho we-can-take-'em grins, not even any embarrassment at being called heroes. Nothing like that at all. It puzzles him, but then, Kirchofer doesn't look like a hero either. No Errol Flynn dashing looks, no Clark Gable squinty-eyed determination. He's just a bland, square-faced man with the start of a double chin beneath his beard. Just some Farmer Joe Littlejohn might have borrowed a tractor from back in Nebraska. But if Kirchofer has stayed alive this long, then Kirby knows he can too, and that's a thought he wants to cling to.

Small arms fire breaks the quiet not far down the line from them.

Grimly, Kirby hefts his B.A.R. around to the forward edge of the foxhole.

The three men hold out their right hands, and Kirby can make out the white of a

long, straight scar across each of their palms. Not new, not fresh; the scars have been there awhile. Years maybe. The three men touch their palms together, then join Kirby at the edge of the foxhole, pulling their own weapons up at the ready.

Kirchofer sees Kirby's puzzled frown and shrugs. It's an awkward, uneasy motion. "Just an old ritual we have," he murmurs. Kirby can hardly hear him over the approaching rifle fire.

"Hey, I ain't superstitious," Kirby answers. "If that's what's kept you alive this long, it's all right by me."

The smoke is clearing, the dust settling, and Kirby steals a glance at Littlejohn. The big man's fallen still, unconscious, and Kirby frets. He eyes the battlefield, caressing the Browning rifle in his hands. He can't wish a medic into existence to help, but he can still fight and fight well. And with Kirchofer at his side? It doesn't matter what the man saw in those Recon photos, the sergeant's untouchable. Kirby claimed he isn't superstitious, but he can't help wanting to believe that Kirchofer's veil of good fortune will fall over anyone with him, even as he knows that's just wishful thinking. If it wasn't, there would be more than three of the original squad left, wouldn't there?

His gaze goes back to Littlejohn, and he swears to himself that no matter what happens today, he'll get the man back in one piece. If he has to make his own luck, he will, but he won't let Littlejohn die out here.

Movement. A streak of grey darts through the field before them. Not just one, but many. German soldiers, lots of them, coming in force. The field in front of First Squad's positions had been heavily mined, but Kirby can tell by the ease of the enemy's movements that there are no such obstacles to their advance here.

"Hold your fire," Kirchofer breathes.

Kirby loosens his grip on the trigger with an effort.

Holding, waiting for the sergeant to give them the word... Kirby knows only seconds are passing, but when you're attuned to every sound, every motion, every uniform coming at you with death on his mind, time becomes an inching nightmare.

When the order finally comes, their own gunfire deafens him as the four open up on the enemy. Germans fall wounded or dead. Some scatter for cover. Some keep coming, relentlessly, heedlessly. There's gunfire up and down the line now, as the Americans fight to repulse the German advance. Interminable minutes tick by, measured by how many bullets they unleash, how many times they reload. Kirby picks his targets carefully; he's not carrying nearly as much extra ammo as he'd like.

Distant *poufs* and smoke canisters are fizzing around them, obscuring the field of fire. He hears someone cursing repeatedly, and it takes him a moment to figure out it's himself. His bursts are even shorter now, conserving rounds, waiting until the enemy soldiers are clear of the smoke screen before shooting.

Wild shouting from somewhere nearby. Kirby can't spare the time to look that direction, but he knows what it means: the Krauts are overrunning a foxhole to the right of them. He does look at Littlejohn again, still unconscious, almost peaceful.

"I'm out," Bleeker says urgently. He drops his rifle and draws a stolen Luger from his jacket.

"They just keep coming!" Martin says, raising up slightly higher to take a better look. A bullet catches him in the face, pitching him backwards. Kirchofer drops Martin's killer with two shots, then swings left to shoot another soldier emerging from the

smokescreen. The sergeant breathes fast and hard, but his aim stays steady and accurate. Kirby covers the right, looses a short spray into the fog before them. A choking scream answers back.

Kirchofer's rifle clicks on empty, and he drops it beside him.

And still the German line advances.

Kirby reloads with his second-to-last magazine.

Kirchofer and Bleeker grip their pistols, but neither one shoots. They turn and sit side by side in the foxhole, backs to the advancing enemy. They're both looking at their dead companion in an odd resigned silence.

"What's a matter with you guys?" Kirby demands. "They're still comin'!" He blasts away again.

"That's right," Kirchofer says, matter-of-factly. "They're still coming." He nods to Bleeker. "The wounded man first. The Krauts won't leave him alive." Bleeker leans over and puts his Luger muzzle against Littlejohn's head.

Kirby hears the words and sees the action out of the corner of his eye and, for a second, it doesn't register. It has no place in the war he fights. Then reality snaps in and he realizes he hasn't seen wrong. He thrusts the B.A.R. aside and flings himself across the foxhole, one hand slapping down hard on the man's wrist, the other coming up from beneath to close around the muzzle. He twists the pistol upward out of Bleeker's hand, flings it away in one angry motion before shoving the man away from Littlejohn. "What are you doing?" Fury makes his words almost incoherent.

Then weight bears down on him hard, and Kirchofer knocks him aside and away from his own man.

"It's over!" Bleeker shouts back at Kirby, gesturing toward the field of battle.

"We've come too far," Kirchofer says. "We aren't going to be taken prisoner. None of us. Not now. We swore a long time ago we wouldn't be taken alive when it came to it." He rubs his scarred palm with his thumb.



Kirby gapes at them a moment, listening to the gunfire around them, the shouting German voices coming ever closer, but he can't break away from staring at the two men, trying to comprehend. Two *heroes*, the last of their squad. "I don't care what you do to yourselves," Kirby snarls. "But you got no right to pull anyone else into your suicide pact."

"But we're finished! It's cleaner this way."

Kirby stabs a finger at Kirchofer's chest. "It's never over 'til we're dead! Littlejohn and I'll take our chances." He scrambles back to the front of the foxhole, scoops up his B.A.R., and opens fire again until the magazine is empty.

A German soldier stumbles out of the smoke right above them. Startled, he fires almost blindly into the foxhole, and Bleeker screams as the bullets tear open his chest.

Kirby pulls the trigger convulsively, but the B.A.R. magazine is still empty.

Kirchofer gives a wordless yell and brings his Colt around, shoots the German twice. Almost as soon as he collapses, another takes his place, rifle raised. Kirby throws himself sideways and reaches desperately in his jacket for his last magazine.

Thompson gunfire rips across the battlefield, and the second German dies even as he aims into the foxhole. More M-1 fire joins from the right and, through the smoke, Kirby sees Americans rallying, pushing the Germans back. Even more encouraging... the Thompson belongs to Saunders. It's First Squad that's approaching.

"See?" Kirby crows. "It ain't over 'til it's over."

Kirchofer stares at his .45, hands trembling uncontrollably. He can't meet Kirby's eyes, but Kirby doesn't care. The B.A.R. man gives a whoop and grins as Saunders drops into a crouch beside their hole. "Never been so glad to see anyone in my whole life, Sarge," Kirby says.

"You okay?"

"The sergeant here is outta ammo," Kirby says, nodding toward Kirchofer. He watches Kirchofer's eyes dart to his. He can't quite read the man's expression -- is it surprise? Gratitude?

"Caje!" Saunders calls over his shoulder. "Throw me some extra clips."

"Where's Doc?" Kirby says. "Littlejohn's hurt bad."

"He's coming up--"

Rifle fire drowns him out, and Saunders' body jerks and slumps, the Thompson dropping from his hands. Swearing, heart thumping again, Kirby reaches out and hauls him into the safety of the foxhole. His hands come away bloody from Saunders' back. He hears Caje and Nelson returning the German fire.

Caje's voice calls through the smoke, "Where's the sergeant? Where's Saunders?"

Kirby looks over to see Kirchofer staring at Saunders' limp form. That's Saunders lying there wounded, Kirby wants to tell him. *Saunders*. Another soldier who's hung on since North Africa, only he's not like you. He doesn't throw in the towel just because things look bad. Oh, the things he could tell Kirchofer, he thinks, but there's no time. The tide in the battle is changing in their favor, but it could change back again just as quickly. The men need experienced leaders. Like Saunders. Like Kirchofer. And abruptly the anger spills over, that it's Saunders lying there wounded and not this untouchable *hero*.

Kirby leans over and balls his fists in Kirchofer's jacket front. He knows he's going to get court-martialed for it, but he doesn't care. Not with Saunders wounded, maybe dying. "All right, you wanna die so badly?" Kirby says, and his fingers, slick with Saunders' blood, bunch tighter in the man's jacket, hauling him close. "Then you get up there and do it right!" His hand slaps closed around the Thompson's stock, and he pushes the weapon at the sergeant, then shoves him away. "Go on! They need you out there, don't you understand? They need a leader. And that's you, if those stripes you're wearing still mean anything."

Kirchofer gapes slack-jawed at him, then he grasps at the Thompson and clambers out of the foxhole.

Twisting around, Kirby reaches in Saunders' jacket, pulls out another clip. "Wait!" he calls and throws the extra ammo to Kirchofer. The man fields it automatically. For a second, he hesitates on the threshold of the foxhole, looking back at Kirby, as exposed to enemy fire as Saunders had been a moment before, and Kirby

frantically waves him away. "Get outta here!"

The sergeant goes, swallowed instantly by the drifting smoke, but Kirby can hear his voice, that same voice that had guided him to this foxhole, now guiding others forward in the counterattack.

Kirby gazes around the foxhole, at Littlejohn and Saunders and the two dead men. As he tugs out a bandage, he wonders what Saunders would have done differently, if perhaps Martin and Bleeker might still be alive if it had been the sarge here instead of him.

That's always the way of it, he thinks. Always feeling guilty for what might have been. For still being alive when the other guy isn't. For a moment, he thinks he might understand Kirchofer, but then the rattle of smalls arms fire shakes him back to the present and a battle that's far from over.

"Kirby?"

It's Doc, running up and dropping into the foxhole beside him.

"Doc!" Kirby says. "Saunders and Littlejohn--"

"I got 'em." Doc's already pulling his medic's bag around as he looks over Saunders. He snatches the half-opened bandage out of Kirby's hand and gestures him away.

"Thanks, Doc," Kirby says. "Take care of 'em, will ya?" He catches up his B.A.R. and slaps the last magazine in. One magazine left, but that's still twenty rounds to use against the enemy. Twenty rounds that might save someone's life. Maybe Cajé or Nelson. Maybe Kirchofer. Maybe some GI he's never met. Every bullet in that magazine counts for saving an American life, not ending one.

And right then, that's all that matters.

end