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Death or Glory
by
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I

Lieutenant Rowland Green was bleeding to death. He had been hit by a 9mm dum-dum round that had plunged into his armpit and burst out through his back in a shower of gore. Sergeant Tom Caine tore open his shirt and applied a shell-dressing, but it was like trying to stem a dam-burst with blotting paper. Blood soaked into his khaki drill shorts. ‘You’ll be all right, sir,’ Caine said. ‘It’s not too bad.’ He pressed the lieutenant’s right hand down on the pad and told him to keep it there. ‘*Orderly,*’ he bellowed. ‘I need morphia – *now.*’

Medical orderly Maurice Pickney heard Caine’s call, but was focused on another task requiring his full attention. Squatting in a slit-trench a few yards away, he was trying to prize a No. 36 Mills grenade from the frozen fingers of Private ‘Tinkerbell’ Jones, who had been shot in the act of hurling it. Jones had a critical wound in the abdomen, and was blubbering in shock. Pickney spoke reassuringly to him, holding his wrist in a vice-like grip with one hand, forcing his fingers back one by one with the other. If Jones released the grenade suddenly, Pickney knew, both of them would have about five seconds to live. A moment later he was gripping the steel pineapple tight in his palm, wondering what to do with it. He was about to chuck it over the edge, when he found the pin lying in the dust. He picked it up, slid it back carefully into place, and let out a long sigh. ‘We’re out of morphia, Sarn’t Caine,’ he yelled.

Caine swore savagely. From further down the line, he

could hear Corporal Harry Copeland demanding a casualty and ammunition report from each trench in turn. From Caine's left came the booming voice of Gunner Fred Wallace, a six-foot-seven regular soldier from Leatherhead. Wallace was relating his experiences, his words coming out slurred with thirst, while someone else treated multiple shrapnel wounds on his arms. 'I seen a Jerry throwing a potato-masher,' he was saying. 'I shot him and he went down, but I didn't mark where the grenade landed, and just as I was squeezing the trigger a second time, it went off. I didn't feel a damn' thing. Didn't even know I'd been hit till I saw the blood.'

The attack had been over no more than a minute, but to Caine it already seemed like a dream. The Germans, Panzer Grenadiers of Rommel's 90th Light Division, had somehow got through the minefield and crawled up a gully, launching the assault from about two hundred yards. Caine's men – No.1 Troop, Middle East Commando – had risen to meet them. Hazily, Caine recalled the ferocious clash of bayonet on bayonet, the thump and crack of grenades, the rat-tat-tat of sub-machine guns fired at point-blank range. The fight couldn't have lasted longer than it took to smoke a cigarette, but time had seemed to stand still. Caine's memories of it were a sequence of disjointed images – putting three .45-calibre rounds through a German soldier's chest – three neat scarlet rosettes blossoming on the khaki drill shirt; Lieutenant Green howling as he shot an enemy with a bullet from his Colt; the Jerry snapping off the dum-dum that brought Green down; Fred Wallace dancing madly like a giant marionette, blasting away with his Bren, scything a swathe through the khaki bodies, bringing out his sawn-off twelve-bore shotgun, flaying off Hun faces; Harry Copeland, the battalion's champion sniper, cool as an ice-pick, drilling

shots from his .303 into the melee; men falling, men thrashing, men entwined together so you couldn't tell friend from foe, mutilated men screaming for Mother; surly ex-Redcap Todd Sweeney stabbing an enemy in the stomach with a bayonet; a German grabbing Sweeney from behind and Geoff Hutchins shooting him in the head with his Tommy-gun, so close that half the man's brains spilled out and splashed over them; then Hutchins himself uplifted gracefully on a wave of fire and smoke that whacked his whole body apart.

The desert sky was an open furnace, pulsating raw heat. The stones around the trenches were so hot they scorched bare flesh: inside, the stifling heat lay on the men like a liquid lead; it was too hot to move, almost too hot to think. The commandos had now been awake more than thirty hours, thanks to the huge doses of Benzedrine they'd swallowed, but the amphetamine haze was wearing thin. Caine felt parched, dazed and exhausted. He pulled the brim of his 'soup bowl' helmet down against the lowering sun, then checked that the drum magazine on his Thompson sub-machine gun was still firmly in place. The gunmetal was hot to the touch. He was the only man in the battalion to use this hundred-round mag, which had a tendency to drop off at inopportune moments. Caine had personally modified the locking mechanism on his magazines, making them secure, and giving his own 'trench-sweeper' more than four times the fire-power of any other. Some of the lads scoffed at what they called his 'Al Capone' shooter, but then few of them had his physique – the powerful shoulders and biceps that were needed to brace the weapon properly.

Caine wasn't much above average height but seemed top-heavy with muscle, as if his chest and shoulders had developed separately from the rest of him. A veteran at

twenty-three, his combat experience was reflected in the grimly determined set of his chin and lips, amplified by the cool steadiness of slate-grey eyes that seemed to have been honed by desert winds. He traversed the Tommy-gun's muzzle across the undulating ground in front of the troop's position – shell-holes, bomb-craters, Jerry dead. All the way along the Box he could see palls of black smoke rising from smouldering vehicles – remnants of a supply column that had tried, in vain, to reach them. There were dark circles like black eyes in the desert where Stuka dive-bombers had crashed and burned, shot down by RAF Kittyhawks and Hurricanes. About four miles to the west he could see dust-clouds kicked up by Panzer Army tanks gathering like crows on the edge of minefields that protected the Box. From the ridge behind him there was the continual snarl and crash of twenty-five-pounder field-guns, manned by men of the Royal Horse Artillery. Caine knew that Jerry's 88mm guns would open up any minute.

He felt Green's fingers close on his wrist and glanced down at him. The lieutenant's face was ashen. 'Your fannies, Caine,' he said weakly. 'Ditch them. The enemy will use them as an excuse to execute you.'

The 'fanny' was the combination knuckle-duster-dagger issued only to the Middle East Commando, and Caine saw at once what the lieutenant meant. If the next wave of Germans captured them and found their fannies – not to mention the cheesewire and explosive charges some of the lads had – they would execute them as 'assassins', or 'saboteurs'.

'Don't worry, sir,' Caine said. 'I'll tell the men to bury them.' Green didn't answer, and Caine saw at once that he was dead. Harry Copeland pivoted into the trench and crouched there, his face under the battered helmet a mask

of dried blood and dust. He was a gawky, good-looking, gangle-legged ex-Service Corps driver, with a stooping shuffle, a long nose and a prominent Adam's apple, whose profile always reminded Caine of some large wading bird. Cope stared, his cobalt-blue eyes popping at Green's corpse, and at his blood pooling in the sand. 'Poor blighter,' he said.

Copeland settled back on his haunches in the sauna-like heat, sweat-runnels grooving tramlines through the mask of filth on his face. He licked lips that were black and cracked with thirst, doffing his tin lid, scratching at a brush of blond hair that grew stiffly vertical like a field of wheat-stubble. Caine watched his Adam's apple working, and thought Cope might throw up. Instead he laid his precious Short Model Lee-Enfield Mk III sniper rifle on his thighs as if it were a baby, careful not to disturb the zeroing of the telescopic sights. 'You got water?' he begged Caine, his words distorted by a bloated tongue, white with mucus. Caine unslung a felt-covered water-bottle, offered it to him. 'Go steady with it,' he rasped. Cope drank in short gulps, then gave the canteen back. He pulled out two Player's Navy Cut cigarettes and handed one to Caine. 'Wallace is all right,' he croaked, his words coming out more clearly now. 'Hide like a rhino. Took a peppering of grenade fragments, but he's still talking.'

'I heard. To stop that bloke yapping you'd have to run him down with a tank.'

'You all right, Tom?'

Caine touched his face and realized it was smeared with his troop officer's blood. 'Yep,' he nodded, sticking the fag in his mouth. He ejected his last two rounds and swapped drum-magazines on his weapon, snapping the working parts back with unnecessary force. He tilted his head towards Green's body. 'Twenty years old and straight out of OCTU,'

he said. ‘Hadn’t even got his knees brown. Might have made a good soldier – we’ll never know. First time in combat and he cops one and lands me with command of the troop.’

Cope lit his cigarette with a Swan Vesta. ‘Not new to you is it, mate,’ he commented.

‘Nope.’

Copeland was one of the few who was aware that, a while back, Caine had been an officer in the Royal Engineers. The corporal didn’t know why he had fallen from grace, though. He had never asked, and Caine had never enlightened him.

Caine shook his Zippo lighter out of its protective rubber condom, and lit the squashed fag. ‘What’s the damage?’ he asked.

‘Ammo’s down to about ten rounds a man, fifty each for the Brens. With Green, we’ve got another six men dead and three seriously wounded. Not counting the boys on the outpost, the troop’s down to seventeen men. Not what you’d call a viable fighting unit.’

Caine had almost forgotten the dozen wounded men posted on a ridge a thousand yards to the west. They had all been hit the previous day, and Lieutenant Green had deployed them on the outpost at first light, on the assumption that the wounded were the most expendable. He had also assured them that they wouldn’t be abandoned.

Caine took a glance over the lip of the trench: the sun was like a burnished brass shield, and his eyes narrowed from its brilliance. He couldn’t see the men on the outpost, but he could hear the crackle of their Brens and the pop of their .55-calibre Boys anti-tank rifles – proof that they were still holding out. He guessed they were all carrying fannies, and wondered if they would have the gumption to bury them before the enemy overran the ridge.

An 88mm round fried air, droned over the position. Caine and Copeland ducked. 'Here they come,' Cope sighed. The shell burst on the escarpment above them, near enough to shower them with rock fragments that pinged off their tin lids. A moment later another man pitched into the trench and hunkered there, panting and dripping sweat. It was 'Prissy' Hogg, a runner from HQ Troop. 'Where's the boss?' Hogg grunted, trying in vain to wet his broken lips with a bone-dry tongue.

Caine gestured at Green's body. 'I'm the boss.'

'All right, skipper,' Hogg said. 'Orders from the OC. You're to withdraw at sunset, 1845 hours. The whole Battle-Group's being pulled out.' His tongue was so arid and swollen that his speech was a series of small detonations.

Caine glanced at his watch – there was about an hour of daylight left. 'What about the wounded lads on the outpost?' he enquired.

'No instructions,' Hogg said. 'Commando practice is to abandon the wounded.'

Caine jabbed out his cigarette stub, his steady grey eyes glaring at Hogg. 'Don't tell *me* about commando practice, Prissy,' he grunted. 'Mr Green promised them they wouldn't be ditched.'

'Nothing you can do,' Hogg said. 'Leave 'em.'

'I'll be damned if I will. I'm going to pull them out, and I'm coming back with you to get the say-so from the OC.'

Hogg swigged water from his canteen. 'Right you are,' he said. 'We can cover each other.'

Caine turned to Cope. 'Stand the men to,' he said. 'Don't budge an inch from here till I get back.'

Copeland's dust-caked features cracked. 'Where were you expecting us to go exactly? For an afternoon stroll?'

The squadron command-post lay in a redoubt about

two hundred yards along the escarpment. It wasn't far by ordinary standards, but with enemy 88mm guns spewing steel it might have been the other end of the earth. Caine and Hogg zig-zagged along the ridge at a low crouch, taking turns to run and cover. 88mm tracer shells lashed in, splitting in puffs of white and brown all over the hillside. Twenty yards from the redoubt, Caine felt the waft of a bullet against his cheek. The slug that had missed him by a hair's breadth slapped into Hogg, who screamed and sprawled headfirst in the gravel. Caine lifted his weapon and hip-boasted a couple of rounds in the direction he thought the shot had come from. Hogg tried to get up, waving a smashed wrist, pumping arterial blood. Caine was yelling 'Get down,' when he heard another bullet hit the runner's chest with a smack like a massive punch – the impact was so powerful that Hogg hurtled three or four yards.

Feeling sick, Caine crawled over and found Hogg on his back, eyes gaping vacantly at the sky. 'Bloody hell,' he grunted. Another round shaved his tin lid and ricocheted off a boulder near by. Caine rolled, leapt up, and dived maniacally for cover behind a slope. Then, keeping below the brow, he crawled towards the HQ sangar, cursing the big ammo-pouches high-slung from his yoke that prevented him from lying flat. It seemed for ever before he made the sangar and lay prone outside.

A firefight was still going on at the foot of the slope to the north as the squadron's other troops fought off attacks. Caine couldn't see the battle, but he could hear the pop and splutter of small-arms, like a distant squabble between madmen. 'Sarn't Caine, No. 1 Troop,' he bawled.

Squadron Sergeant Major Bill Ramsay crept up to the sangar entrance, hessian-covered soup-bowl shadowing bloodshot eyes. 'I want to see the OC,' Caine told him.

The SSM's head was replaced by that of the OC, Major Kenneth Crawford, a chubby man with spectacles, and a furtive look. 'What's your situation, Sergeant?' he asked.

'We've taken heavy casualties, sir. I don't think we can stand another attack.'

'It'll be sundown soon. Jerry won't be back before first light tomorrow. He doesn't like night-attacks. By that time, God willing, we'll be long gone'

'Very good, sir, but I've got wounded on that ridge to the west.' Caine gestured in the direction of the outpost. 'I want your permission to bring them in.'

Crawford's jaw set. 'Just leave them, Caine. They'll be accorded the rights of war.'

'No they won't. They're carrying fannies, cheesewire and God knows what else. The Jerries don't like 'irregulars'. If they find commando weapons, they'll line them up and shoot 'em.'

The OC didn't seem to be taking in his words. 'You don't understand, Caine. Rommel has broken through the Gazala Line. The whole Eighth Army is in retreat. What do you think . . . ?'

Caine never found out exactly what Crawford wanted to know, because at that moment the sergeant major's voice shouted, 'Message from battalion, sir.' The major ducked inside the trench, and a second later a shell whistled in, striking the redoubt with a direct hit. All Caine remembered later was a dumb-bell on his chest, a mushroom of earth, rocks and smoke, an expanding flash of orange and black, and several burning bodies being flipped into the air.

He must have passed out, because the next thing he knew he was being shaken by the squadron second-in-command, Captain Robin Sears-Beach, a truculent officer with a game-cock walk, front teeth like tombstones and a disturbing

absence of chin. ‘You’re all right, Caine,’ Sears-Beach was repeating. ‘Get back to your position.’

Caine did a mental body check: other than the familiar scorch of thirst in his mouth, there was no pain anywhere. Everything seemed to be functioning properly, and he found it hard to believe that he hadn’t been hit. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a medical orderly trying to beat out flames on something that looked like a giant black cocoon. The next moment, a round punched clean through the orderly’s helmet. He went down without a sound.

Caine tore his eyes away, rubbed split and distended lips. ‘You got water, sir?’ he wheezed.

‘Use your own,’ Sears-Beach snapped.

Caine scabbled for his bottle, uncorked it with shaky fingers, took a blissful gulp. ‘The section on the outpost,’ he drawled. ‘They’re cut off.’

‘Leave them. Just get the rest of the troop out when the time comes.’

Caine’s ashlar eyes smouldered like embers about to burst aflame. ‘You don’t dump your mates,’ he said.

The captain gripped his wrist, and Caine looked into dilated nostrils and bared teeth. ‘Don’t argue with me, Caine. I’m acting OC, and I said leave them. Now, get back to your troop.’

By the time he had crawled back to his position the desert had turned orange and gold, the lowering sun casting strange loops of shadow that gave the whole battlefield a surreal look. The furnace heat was trailing off, replaced by a wind that rose like a scream, driving eddies of dust, rasping faces, sandpapering throats and tongues. The pressure of enemy artillery had eased. The dead had been laid reverently outside the trenches, and Pickney was still working his way back and forth from casualty to casualty. Caine threw himself into his slit-trench. Wallace, who always carried a Bren-gun in action, throwing its weight around as if it were a toy, was in there, bracing the weapon on its bipod legs, in stand-to position. Copeland, brewing tea on a Primus stove, raised his startling blue eyes as Caine crouched against the parapet. 'Prissy's dead,' Caine said bluntly.

'Shit. Was that the HQ position going up?'

'Yep. Whole bunker got wiped. Sears-Beach has assumed command.'

'That turd,' Wallace groaned, waving a saucer-sized hand at the hordes of flies that had invaded the trench the moment the heat had begun to wane. Caine became suddenly aware that his chest and arms were black with the creatures. He started slapping them away but quickly gave up: it was like trying to make a dent in water.

'Tea's up,' said Cope. 'Anyone without his mug can drink out of his arse.'

The tea was hot, sweet and strong, thick with condensed

milk, and they drank it crunching desperately on hard-tack biscuits, flapping away flies. The only good thing that could be said about the heat, Caine reflected, was that it dampened your appetite. When he and Copeland were done, Cope relieved Wallace on the Bren. The big man shifted his gargantuan bulk, squatting next to Caine. With his wrestler's physique, his forest of stubble, his tangled nest of dark hair, his chiselled features black with powder-burns and his intense, black eyes, he looked, Caine thought, like an ogre out of a children's story. Fred Wallace – rugby-prop, champion boxer and the Commando's best Bren marksman – was so enormous that Caine was surprised that any enemy sniper could ever miss him in combat. Subconsciously, he'd come to regard the giant as unkillable – an elemental force of nature. Wallace could usually be distinguished also by the sphinx tattoo on his left forearm – the insignia of his old unit, F (Sphinx) Battery, 4 Royal Horse Artillery – but both arms were now heavily bandaged, adding extra bulk to his already colossal limbs. Wallace gulped the tea and spat it out in disgust. 'Call that tea?' he demanded. 'It would have been *better* drinking out of my arse!'

'That's where you can stick it, then,' Cope said. He noticed that, for all his talk, Wallace didn't tip the tea away.

When he'd finished his tea, the big man drew out his pet back-up weapon – the twin-barrelled sawn-off Purdey shotgun he carried in a homemade leather pouch slung on his belt. He broke open the gun, checked the chambers and started to clean them lovingly with a dry cloth. He didn't try to oil the weapon: he'd long since learned that oil and sand didn't mix.

'I don't know why you carry that thing,' Caine commented. 'It's an illegal firearm. If the Boche find that on you, you really will be for the high-jump.'

Wallace held up the twelve-bore to the light and peered happily through both smoothbore barrels. He took a pair of buckshot cartridges from his webbing, slotted them into the chambers, snapped the gun shut. 'Purdey's got me out of more scrapes than I've had hot dinners,' he said. 'I couldn't part with her now.'

Cope turned back to watch his arc. 'Hey,' he said a moment later. 'A red Very light has just gone up from the outpost. Is that important?'

Caine squeezed next to him and peeped over the brim of the trench, catching the tail-end of the Very flare. 'That's the distress signal,' he said. 'It means they can't hold out any longer.'

The sun had already gone down and the landscape was drained of its wild sunset colours. The furnace wind had dropped, but trails of smoke and dust still drifted languidly across the desert like gossamer veils. Caine pointed out a gully that ran at right angles from the bottom of the salient as far as the outpost ridge. 'I'm going to bring those lads in,' he said. 'I'll work my way up that wadi. It should give me cover from fire, especially after dark.'

Wallace pressed his massive frame between Caine and Copeland. 'I'm with you, skipper,' he said.

Caine shook his head. 'You're wounded.'

Wallace grinned, his teeth pearly white against his powder-blackened face.

'You don't call this wounded, do you? I've had worse than this on a night's boozing in Cairo. Anyhow, you'll never do it on your own.'

Cope released the Bren's stock and sat back on his haunches. His ostrich-like features had taken on a cast of disdainful superiority, as if he were in the presence of a couple of dim-witted pupils. 'I think you may have overlooked one

small factor, *mein Herr*,' he said to Caine. 'Some of those boys will be stretcher-cases. What, so you're going to carry half a dozen men each? Pardon me for being a dunderhead, but how's that going to work, then? You're going to ferry them one by one? By my reckoning, that's going to take at least three and a half hours to clear the lot. I reckon the enemy is going to have rumbled it by then, apart from the fact that you're both going to be shattered after a couple of runs.'

Caine nodded. It was true that he hadn't considered the stretcher-cases.

Copeland leaned further over the edge of the trench and pointed down the salient to a knot of lorries that had formed part of the supply column. Most were wrecked and smoking, but not all. 'I reckon there's at least one 3-tonner down there that's in good nick,' he said. 'We could drive it up the wadi and shift the lot of them in one bash. If we've got juice, we needn't head back to the Battle Group RV. We could drive straight to the fall-back at Jaghbub. Can you find the way?'

'Yep, I can find the way,' Caine said, 'but I don't know about "we". I'm not having you getting in the shit for me.'

'What d'you mean?' Wallace demanded. 'It's "commando initiative", innit? If those lads get caught with their fannies, they're dog meat.'

'Sears-Beach didn't see it that way.'

'Sears-*Bitch* is a bonehead – you know that. That chump wouldn't know "commando initiative" if it got up and poked his eye out. He should of stuck to the Shepherd Hotel Short Range Desert Bar-pushers, or whatever crappy outfit he used to be in.'

'Yeah, and if we *do* get in the shite," said Cope, grinning, 'we'll just say you ordered us to do it.'

Caine gave in. He knew he shouldn't be putting their lives at risk like this, but their loyalty moved him almost to tears. 'This calls for a sacrament,' he said. He brought a crumpled brown envelope out of his breast pocket, and offered it solemnly to the two men.

'What's this?' Cope enquired.

'Bennies,' Caine said. 'We'll need them if we're going to get away with a stunt like this.'

There were still a few minutes of light left when they made it to the 3-tonner. Before leaving, Caine had passed command of the troop over to Corporal ‘Todd’ Sweeney, the next most senior non-com after Copeland. He told Sweeney to extract the unit the moment darkness fell, and to make a tactical withdrawal to the Battle Group RV behind the ridge. There would be transport waiting to take them back to Jaghub. Sweeney, a tight-lipped, balding ex-military policeman with a barrel chest and a head like a football, didn’t seem happy with the order. ‘What am I supposed to say if Captain Sears-Beach wants to know where you are?’ he demanded. ‘I don’t like bullshitting my superiors.’

‘You ain’t got a problem, then, have you?’ Wallace grinned. ‘Sears-Beach ain’t your superior: he’s a bloody moron.’

‘Tell him the truth,’ Caine cut in. ‘Say we’re missing in action.’

As an afterthought, the three of them had handed over their fannies to Sweeney for safekeeping, and Caine had felt an unexpected reluctance to part with his dagger. True, being captured with an unorthodox weapon would hamper any attempt to present a cover story, but on the other hand, it was the commandos’ symbol – both their cap-badge, and the mark of their ‘specialness’. Caine had had to tell Wallace to relinquish his fanny twice before the giant pressed it reluctantly into Sweeney’s hands.

As they reached the wagon, the RHA battery on the ridge launched a walloping barrage, splitting the darkness with

seams of blinding white light. They hurled themselves flat with their hands over their tin lids and didn't move until the bombardment stopped. There were answering booms and flashes from the German 88mms, but Caine judged the elevation too far above them to worry about.

He sloped off to make a quick inspection of the vehicle, and was back in five minutes. 'Looks like the driver took a round in the head,' he said. 'Sniper job. Ten to one he stalled the engine. I doubt that the lorry was hit, because she's carrying a load of "flimsies". If she had been, they'd have gone off like a rocket.'

Copeland nodded. 'Flimsies' were four-gallon cans of petrol, packed two to a wooden crate, so called because of their notorious tendency to leak. Cope could never understand why the Allies hadn't adopted the German-pattern 'jerry' can, which was so much more efficient. 'That'll solve the juice problem, anyway,' he said.

'Yep, but we'll need to get rid of some if we're going to fit the boys in.'

They moved to the lorry, where Copeland and Wallace started passing flimsies out of the back. Caine removed the dead driver and laid him in the sand. He jumped into the cab and examined the starter, gear lever, pedals. Just as he'd guessed, the gear lever was stuck in first. The fuel gauge showed that the tanks were almost full.

He jumped down, checked the tyres, then took a peek under the bonnet. The engine looked sound. He closed it, hurried round to the tailboard and found that the others had dumped enough flimsies. 'You take the tailboard,' he told Cope. 'Fred, there's a hatchway up in the cab roof, with a pintle-mount. Can you fix the Bren there?'

'I'll have a look.'

'How many mags did you get?'

Wallace had collected .303 ammo from the rest of the troop, but still had only three full magazines. 'If we get into a contact,' Caine said, 'fire only singles.'

Caine was in the driver's seat and about to hit the starter when Cope banged on the back of the cab. 'How are they going to know it's us?' he demanded urgently. 'They'll be on a hair trigger up there. We don't want 'em opening up on us.'

Caine cursed himself silently. He fumbled in his haversack for the Very pistol he'd brought. 'Thanks, Harry,' he said to the back of the cab. 'Talk about dunderhead – I completely forgot. The signal is a blue Very light. I'm firing it now.'

He stuck the pistol out of the open window and squeezed the trigger. There was a bang and a pop, followed by a flash of brilliant blue light. Caine and Wallace sat frozen until it faded. As if in answer, there were more crashes of artillery fire from the top of the escarpment. Caine noted that the interval between salvos was getting longer and guessed that the gunners were covering themselves as they limbered up. They must be almost out of shells by now anyway.

Caine reloaded the Very pistol in case it was needed. Then he toed the starter and the engine burst into life. Close up it sounded like thunder, and Caine had to remind himself that in the vastness of the theatre, with hundreds of vehicles lumbering about and big guns firing all over the place, the enemy would never pinpoint its location. 'I'm keeping her in first,' he told Wallace. 'We're going without headlights, so mind you keep your beady eyes on the road.'

Caine was the scion of generations of village blacksmiths, and had fire and steel in his veins. He had been at home with motor vehicles ever since he had learned to drive a tractor at the age of twelve. An apprentice mechanic on

Civvy Street, he prided himself on his ability to handle them. Managing a big lorry in the desert at night wasn't all that easy, but as a Sapper mechanic he'd been attached to 7th Armoured Division – the 'Desert Rats' – from the start of the war. He had as much desert driving experience as anyone, and more than most.

He nursed the vehicle slowly into the gully, his eyes pinned on the way ahead. Daylight had faded out completely, and there was no moon – he drove by feel and starlight. Potholes, rocks and sudden drops were the main threats, but there was also the danger that Jerry had mined the area or sowed it with thermos bombs. The one thing he fervently hoped was that there was no enemy night-patrol hidden in the darkness. Once the lorry was spotted they would be damned lucky if they got out – with all that petrol in the back, a single round could turn them into a fireball.

He gripped the wheel hard, hunched over, his heart throbbing, his breathing rapid. Every yard covered safely was a small victory. The lorry bumped and rattled over the stones. Occasional flashes of cannon fire ripped the night sky open above them, making Caine wince. Once again he had to remind himself that the artillery duel was nothing to do with them.

'Stop!' Wallace growled suddenly. Caine's heart bumped.

'What is it?'

'Something down there.'

Caine put the gear lever in neutral and applied the hand-brake, while the giant dropped from the cab, landing on hands and feet like a big black panther. He disappeared into the darkness and shortly reappeared on Caine's side, his tiny black eyes holding pinpricks of starlight. 'Step in the wadi bed,' he said. 'About two feet. Can you make it?'

Caine told him to stand back. He put the truck in gear

and inched her over the edge of the step. There was a second's hiatus before the front wheels dropped and the big balloon tyres bounced on the hard surface with a wobbling of suspension. Caine moved the lorry forward until her back wheels had cleared the step. He applied the brake, dropped out of the cab and shouted to Copeland. The three of them set to work collecting boulders to build a ramp so that they could take the step easily on the way back.

It took only a few minutes. Back in the hot seat, Caine drove forward slowly, all his senses alert. The truck rocked and grated over rough boulders. Occasional 88mm shells whizzed overhead. The ridge was only a thousand yards from where they'd started, but it seemed an age before they arrived. Then, while Wallace and Cope covered him from outside, Caine made a three-point turn, expecting shots to ring out from above every second. He cut the engine and joined the others in the lee of the escarpment, where they crouched close together for a moment, taking slow sips of water from their canteens. Though the air had cooled slightly since sunset, the ground still throbbed with the heat it had soaked up in daylight hours. They watched enemy shells star-bursting on the Box behind them. Return fire from the RHA was desultory now, and Caine guessed there was only one gun left, firing for effect. That meant the entire Middle East Commando – or what was left of it – had gone. They would soon be joining the defeated remnants of the Eighth Army from the entire length of the Gazala Line, limping back to Egypt in a vast motor fleet – the worst defeat the British had suffered since Dunkirk. For a moment an unexpected loneliness engulfed him. He found himself thinking about Todd Sweeney, and hoping the rest of his troop was safely on its way to the fall-back RV.

He put it out of his mind. 'All right,' he said. 'We go up

spread out five yards apart, and carefully does it. We don't want any accidents.'

The ridge was loose shale, no more than thirty feet high. It was an easy enough climb, but far too noisy for Caine's liking. What if the lads had failed to spot the Very light? What if they were walking into an ambush set up by their own men? Caine broke over the ridge and spotted a movement, a faint flutter of white in the darkness. He fell flat just as a weapon cracked. A bullet soughed past his ear. 'Don't shoot!' he screamed. 'Don't *anybody* shoot. It's Tom Caine, No. 1 Troop.'

'Caine?' a reedy voice came out of the darkness. 'Hell's bells, about bleeding time.'

Caine moved forward cautiously and almost bumped into Jake Campbell, a wiry corporal formerly of the Highland Light Infantry. Campbell looked to be in a bad way – his face was covered in concussion cracks, like old porcelain, and both his head and his left arm were swathed in bandages – hence the white flash Caine had glimpsed in the darkness. Campbell held a .45-calibre Colt automatic pistol in his right hand.

'You never could hit a barn door at twenty paces, Jake,' Caine said.

'Lucky for you, brother.'

Cope asked if he'd clocked the blue Very light. Campbell nodded shakily, and Caine saw that he was on the verge of collapse. He put his arm round the corporal's shoulders to steady him. 'Thank God,' Campbell whispered. 'Mr Green promised, but we thought you wasn't coming.'

'Where are the rest?'

Campbell pointed weakly to a low rise only a few yards away. 'In all-round defence,' he cackled.

'Listen, Jake,' Caine told him gently. 'Go down the slope,

and you'll find our 3-tonner in the wadi. Get in the cab and rest. You've done enough. We'll take it from here.'

'Aye, well you'd best put a move on, because we spotted enemy patrols creeping through the minefield just before last light.'

Campbell staggered off. Caine and the others moved to the bank, where half a dozen commandos sat or lay on ground like the surface of a cheese-grater, in a rough semi-circle. They had abandoned their slit-trenches at sunset, re-assigning them to the dead, whom they'd buried there in sand and gravel as best they could. The ridge-top was grooved and pitted by enemy rounds, and the thicket of thorn-trees that had once ringed the position had been reduced to a nest of groping, skeletal claws. Of the twelve men Green had posted on the ridge that morning, only these six were left alive: many were barely conscious, others begged through swollen lips for water their rescuers couldn't give them. Some were shockingly wounded. Private Dick Grafton's leg was a raw mass of bloody pulp from which the bones protruded. Private John Pearson's right arm had been shattered, the bones crushed, the blood vessels hanging out. Private Arthur Norris sat holding a shell-dressing to the side of his skull, a good proportion of which appeared to be missing.

'Jesus Christ,' Wallace gasped. 'What the hell happened here?'

'Hell happened,' someone gasped, and Caine recognized 'Quiff' Smithers, the section medical orderly. He was lying in a huddle on the ground, his khaki drill heavy with dried blood. 'I tried to patch 'em up,' Smithers said, 'till I took three rounds in the leg.'

Caine gulped, realizing that Smithers was virtually para-

lysed. ‘You’ve done a cracking job,’ he said. ‘You deserve a medal for this. You all deserve a medal.’

‘They can stuff their medals,’ Smithers groaned. ‘Just get us out of this shit-hole.’ He squinted at Wallace and, noticing the giant’s heavily bandaged arms for the first time, exploded with hysterical laughter that turned quickly into racking coughs. ‘You don’t look too bloody good yourself,’ he spluttered. ‘Talk about the blind leading the blind.’

‘Yeah, well, we’re the best you’re going to get, mate,’ Wallace grunted, slightly miffed. ‘You can either put up with us or stay here.’

They had no stretchers, but they scoured the dead men’s haversacks for ponchos and used them to ferry the wounded downhill, worst cases first. To spare Wallace’s arms, Cope and Caine did the carrying, while Wallace covered them with the Bren. As they ferried the last casualty – Smithers – over the brow of the ridge, the giant said softly, ‘There’s a light.’

Caine and Copeland laid the wounded man down and hunkered next to Wallace, peering into the night. Caine was just beginning to think that the big man had imagined it, when he spotted the faintest flicker of flame. ‘A match,’ he said.

Copeland nodded and fingered his sniper rifle. ‘Lighting fags,’ he said. ‘Ideal sniper bait’

‘Forget it,’ Caine said. ‘Let’s get this man in the wagon.’ They moved the medical orderly downhill, with Wallace walking backwards, covering them. While Cope was making Smithers comfortable with the others, Caine pulled out of his haversack a small surprise he had been saving for this moment. It was a No. 78 Hawkins grenade – a flat canister of explosive like an oversized brandy flask – with a time-pencil attached. He half-buried the bomb in the sand and

crushed the time-pencil. The fuse gave them five minutes to clear out.

Caine hauled himself into the driver's seat, noting that Wallace was already positioned at the hatch above, his Bren fixed on the pintle-mount. 'Here we go,' he said.

He hit the starter. There was a dead click. He tried again: the mechanism failed to respond. He tried and failed a third time, then hurled himself out of the cab, head swimming, wondering what twisted logic had persuaded him to plant the Hawkins grenade before he'd even started the engine. The time-pencil was set to five minutes. If he couldn't start the lorry within that time, the bomb would blast the wagon and the wounded men to kingdom come.

For a split second he hovered between decisions – whether to try and remove the time-pencil, to clear everyone out of the lorry or to fix the problem. He took a deep breath and realized that he knew what the trouble was. He'd been working with engines all his adolescence and adult life, and had an instinctive feel for them. For him, motor vehicles were dependable creatures that would perform any duty required of them so long as they were treated with respect, and their needs supplied. He decided to trust his instinct: at once he felt calmer.

He opened the bonnet, stared into the gaping darkness and took another deep breath. He didn't need a torch to deal with a 3-tonner engine: over the years he'd trained himself to inspect them by touch. Knowing there would be no second chance, his fingers walked deftly from spark plugs to carburettor, radiator, fan belt and engine block, feeling for faults, testing connections. Finally, he felt the battery. Exactly as he had thought: one of the leads had come loose. As he strove to tighten the screw, he heard Wallace shout, 'Enemy on the ridge!' There was a clatter of sub-machine-

gun fire, still out of range, but getting closer. Caine closed his eyes, praying that no stray round would hit the petrol in the back.

He finished screwing, slammed the bonnet, rushed back to the cab. He hoisted himself into the driver's seat, hit the starter. The engine roared.

He had just shifted into first gear, when something hard clunked stone not ten yards from his window. 'Grenade!' Wallace yelled from the hatchway. Caine rammed down the accelerator and the lorry jerked forward, just as the grenade erupted in a whoosh of fire. 'Enemy coming down the ridge!' Wallace bawled.

Caine revved the engine and changed into second gear, dimly aware of the rat-tat-tat of Schmeisser 9mm sub-machine pistols, the pop of Gewehr 41 semi-autos. He twisted the steering wheel, desperately veering left, then right, already going faster than was safe in this terrain. There were screams from the wounded men in the back. Above him, Wallace had started firing a steady stream of single shots. Caine noticed the pause as he changed magazines, and knew his ammo wouldn't last much longer. At the tailboard, Cope was punching off aimed rounds as steadily as was possible from the bucking vehicle. 'They're nearly down,' Wallace roared.

Right then, Caine heard a stomach-churning whine of air like a high-pitched siren, followed by a detonation that seemed to lift the world up and flip it over, ripping the night into a million brilliant shards. The lorry jiggered as a blast wave belched over it and Caine gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned ivory. He was just thinking that it was an awfully big blast for a Hawkins bomb when he heard another rasp like a giant razor slicing through canvas, and a second shattering explosion sent the night wobbling,

followed by a third, smaller one. For a moment there was no sound but for the droning engine, then Caine heard Wallace yell. 'Yaah! The Gunners! God bless the Horse-Gunners!'

It struck him like a slap in the face that they had just been saved by shells fired by the Royal Horse Artillery, from the last 25-pounder on the Box. The third explosion had been the Hawkins bomb going up. If he had ever in his life made any disparaging comment about the Artillery, he begged silent forgiveness. The gun crews up there must have seen them from the start. He didn't know how the hell they'd done it in the dark, but it was the finest damn' gunnery he'd ever seen.

The truck roared down the wadi, and Caine strained his eyes to make out the step where they'd built the ramp. It came up in less than a minute, and Caine slowed down and changed to first. The lorry took the step without a hitch. Caine changed back to second and was just accelerating, congratulating himself on his foresight in preparing the ramp, when something big and soft thunked on the bonnet. Caine's eyes popped out in disbelief. It was an Afrika Korps soldier, his face pressed hard against the windscreen and twisted into a horrific leer. He was struggling to bring a Schmeisser to bear with one hand while holding on desperately with the other. Caine, blinded by the obstruction, felt the lorry's wheels shuddering and fought to right her. He shot a sideways glance at the now-comatose Jake Campbell in the passenger seat, and as he did so noticed Wallace's twelve-bore sawn-off leaning against the gear lever. He didn't know why the giant had left it there: he remembered Wallace loading it, though, and was certain he hadn't used it since. He grabbed it, cocked the hammers one-handed, pointed it at the ghastly face only inches away from his and fired both

barrels The windscreen shattered; the German's face seemed to burst into flames and was gone. Caine kept his head low, ducking glass shards, almost lying on the steering wheel. For a moment he thought she was going over. Then the big balloon tyres got a purchase. Caine took the curve in second, changed up to third, and accelerated onwards into the desert night.