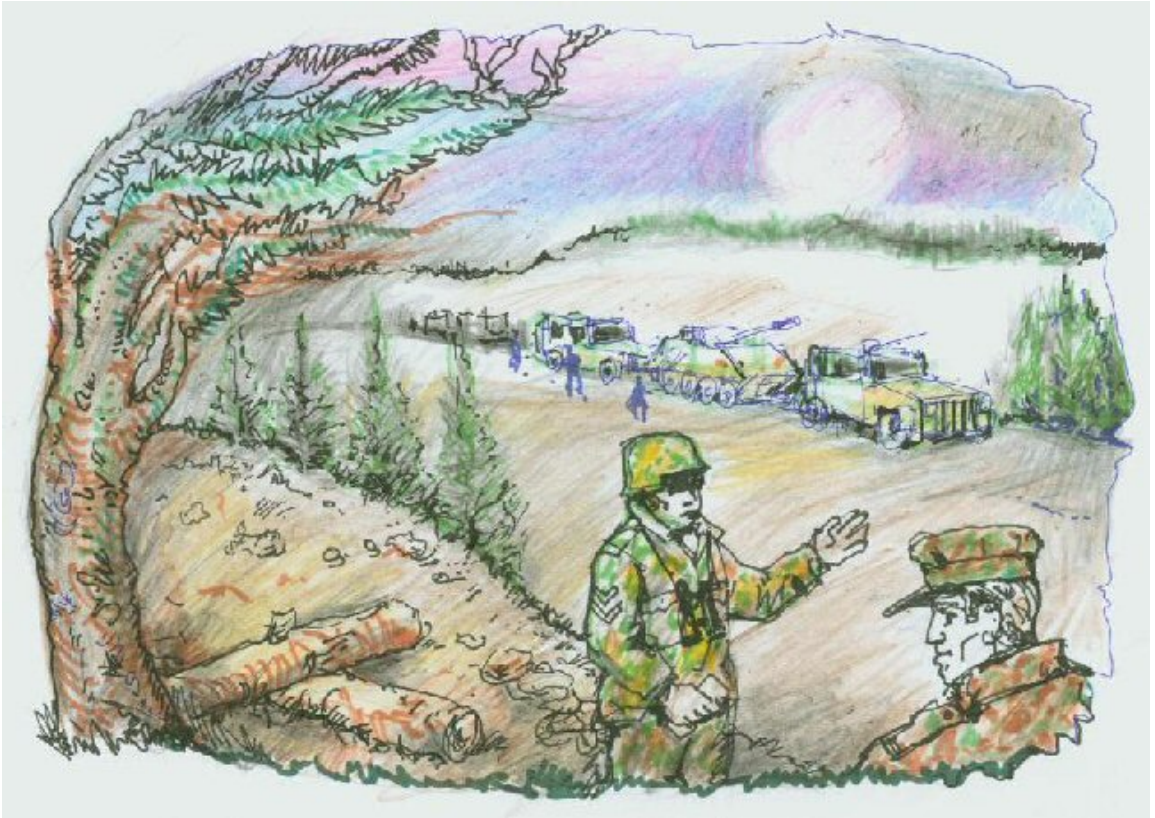


INCIDENT IN THE FAR NORTH

by Jan Kurdwanowski

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The glowing disk of the orange sun was slowly sliding down the slope of the hill, grazing the bushes, high grasses and faraway treetops. The haze lingered at the foot of the hill, where the dark wall of the pine forest stood silently, not a breeze moved the branches, not a sound stirred the still air. The rays of the setting sun gilded one side of a little stone hut situated at the flat top of the hill. The windowpanes were missing, as was the door; their dark, almost black rectangles stood out against the illuminated wall. A distant murmur disrupted the silence and as it grew

nearer and louder, it transformed itself gradually into a cacophony of clattering, clanking and clanging interwoven with the roar of engines. The steel treads grated against the rocky dirt road. The noise came to a stop with a long screech. A cloud of dust rose enveloping a few jeeps, trucks and armored personnel carriers, all adorned with evergreen branches. A young lieutenant in combat fatigues, a map in his hand, stepped out of a jeep, waited until the dust settled, looked around, cocked his head, then turned to a broad shouldered sergeant looking a bit older and still in the driver's seat.

“This would be the best place.” He waved his hand; the engines came to a stop and the silence was restored.

The lieutenant started up the hill toward the hut basking in the last rays of the sun. The sergeant followed him. They circled the hut a few times surveying the area.

“We will set up a camp down at the edge of the forest among the trees and put the transceiver up here,” said the lieutenant. Down the dirt road the soldiers remained in their vehicles, some resting on the floor, taking advantage of the break in the long journey, after hours of jostling and lurching. The sergeant hurried down the slope and yelled out a few orders. Drivers who were slouched over the steering wheels perked up at the sound of his voice. The engines roared again. The entire column drove off the road slowly heading toward a nearby grove of pines and came to a halt. The ear splitting noise of chain saws rose through the air. The soldiers cut down a few evergreens to make room for their vehicles, inched their way in between the trees and disappeared under the canopy of branches. The sergeant followed them on foot and saw to it that they

made themselves not visible from the sky. The soldiers pitched tents. Some ate their K rations, others were too tired to bother with food. As soon as the camp was set up, they crawled under the tents or made themselves comfortable in the personnel carriers. The lieutenant briefly inspected the stone hut consisting of two rooms. There was a kitchen stove in one, the other was embellished with a large door mirror, once a part of a wardrobe, propped up against the wall opposite the window. A few worn out cots were scattered around. When the sergeant, accompanied by the radioman, returned to the top of the hill, both carrying a portable transceiver, the lieutenant stood motionless staring toward the section of the horizon where the sun had just disappeared.

“What’s new?” asked the lieutenant, without turning to the sergeant, his eyes fixed on the salmon sky.

“I got the platoon ready for the night. Corporal Horn is in charge of the sentries.”

“Everybody needs rest, it may be a busy day to morrow... you go to sleep first, I will take care of the transceiver for now,” said the lieutenant.

It took them some time before they set the transceiver inside the hut. The lieutenant returned to his jeep and carried back a small strong-box. He was the only one with access to it. Then the sergeant went down the hill, crossed the gray ribbon of the winding dirt road and disappeared among the trees.

As usual in the far north, the day was slowly yielding to the night. The border between the light and the darkness was hardly moving across the sky toward the invisible sun resting deeper and deeper below the horizon...and the stars

glittered wherever the night prevailed. A cool breeze swung the tree branches and rustled in the bushes. The lieutenant returned to the hut, told the radioman to go to sleep in the adjacent kitchen, pushed the cot next to the transceiver, switched it on, wrapped himself in blankets and lay down. The dot of light on the scanner ran smoothly back and forth across the screen. The eyes could not resist following its pendulum-like movements, and there was nothing else amidst the emptiness of the night which might draw the attention of the senses. Soon somnolence forced the lieutenant to sit up. It took a strenuous effort to keep his eyelids apart. He avoided staring directly at the rhythmic hypnotizing movements of the dot of light. Instead he tried to watch it out of the corner of his eye. Again and again, he dozed off and having lost his balance, the lieutenant would sober up suddenly, as he slid down the wall. He was awakened by a beam of light in his face, a strange glow. It took him a while to recognize that it radiated from the mirror propped up against the wall opposite the window. Perhaps it was a reflection of the northern lights about which he read many times but never saw. By the time the lieutenant untangled himself from the blankets and rose to his feet, the reflection of the mysterious light in the mirror faded away. A muffled thunder rolled across the sky, a gust of wind struck the trees and died out. The lieutenant stepped out of the hut expecting to see the signs of the approaching storm, but the better part of the sky was dotted with stars as before and the woods stood silent and still again.

What was it, he wondered, northern lights should not have faded so abruptly.

He looked down the hill toward the invisible encampment, but not a sound was to be heard. A grave concern entered his mind. His first impulse was to go down to the camp, but on second thought the lieutenant changed his mind. No point waking up the crew in the middle of the night; it can wait until the morning. Back on the cot and wrapped up in blankets, he did not let the scanner out of his sight. The dot of light traveled slowly back and forth across the dial, its sweep resembling the pacing of a lonely animal inside a cage. Its rhythmic movements were no longer lulling him to sleep. Instead it increased his alertness as if every “empty” turn of the dot was bringing closer the arrival of the message he expected – just as each turn of a roulette wheel stopping on the black supposedly brings closer the red. The lieutenant tried to collect his thoughts. The unit must be ready for action tomorrow, whatever the action might be. Everything depended on the wellbeing of his crew. Somewhere down south they would know what happened if anything and would wire instructions. When the time came to wake up the sergeant, the lieutenant decided to wait until he knew more. He had met him first only a few days before and would rather have a ready decision on hand than share his doubts with a subordinate and a stranger at that. He requested this assignment in order not to have anyone breathe down his neck at headquarters. Now, facing an unclear situation, he regretted he was forbidden to radio headquarters for advice. The time to wake up Bob, the radioman, also came and passed. As the minutes and hours dragged on and daybreak neared, the hope of getting the wired message was fading away and the lieutenant came to the realization that it may not come in

time. Now it was his and only his responsibility to decide what to do. He stepped out of the hut. Down the slope, in the darkness, lay the silent camp. An image occurred to him, of a scene he read once about, of an entire caravan of men stung by a tsetse fly, deep in their terminal sleep. While he looked at the sky for signs of the northern lights, the lieutenant thought about the last few days of their trek; how the forest changed as they traversed the wilderness on their way north. As the groves of maples and oaks shriveled and faded away; the spruces, the fir-trees and the pines grew more lush. Then the evergreens started shriveling and hugging the earth on high hills and mountain slopes, for protection against wintry gales. It brought to the lieutenant's mind a fairy tale, once his favorite, about the Snow Queen and her immense palace made of drifted snow and biting winds, lit by the northern lights...there was a frozen lake in front of the palace and at its center the Queen sat on the throne. Her earrings were icicles, her crown of snow flakes glittered under the northern lights. Again and again in his childhood fantasies the lieutenant rode in a sleigh drawn by a reindeer crossing white plains, passing mountains and forests, defying blizzards, always seeking the palace of the Snow Queen, whose kiss would turn your heart into ice. The lieutenant looked at his watch. No longer could he justify operating the transceiver himself. He woke up Bob the radioman.

“You will decode messages and report them only to me, to no one else, not even to sergeant Thorpe.”

As Bob sat by the transceiver, the lieutenant stepped out. The orange disc of the setting moon hovered above the horizon. Soon the sky began changing its color from black

to midnight blue. As the day was advancing some of the stars grew pale, others brightened for a while until the sun extinguished them. He went back to the hut and said to the radioman:

“I told you before not to give any message to anyone, I changed my mind; you can give all the messages to the sergeant except one...he hesitated...have you noticed anything unusual this night?”

“No sir, said Bob.”

“Did anything wake you up?”

“No sir, I slept right through until you woke me up.”

“There was a bright light in the sky, began the lieutenant, a gust of wind came, and a thunder, it did not sound like lightning that strikes a nearby tree, it was rather distant, but not that distant. Besides the sky was clear and starry. It may have been a nuclear explosion...of sorts...anyway; if any harmful radiation hit our camp, you and I were shielded by the stone walls. What I just told you, is for your information only, nobody is to know about it, not even the sergeant. You may give to him all the decoded messages except the one about the explosion.”

The lieutenant strode down the slope. Before entering the camp he came upon the sentry.

“How was the night?”

“Sir, not too bad and not too long.”

“Anything to report? “

“No sir, it was a quiet night. Not even a bear came sniffing around?”

“I heard dry branches crackling in the woods, there must have been something big, may be a reindeer.”

“Or an enemy paratrooper?”

“Sir, how would they know that we are here?, not even a plane flew overhead.”

“Did you see anything unusual, like northern lights?”

“No sir, it was pitch dark all the time.”

As the lieutenant continued circling the camp he ran into corporal Horn.

“How was the night?”

“It was quiet,” said Horn. “I ordered the sentries to wake me up in case of anything suspicious or unusual and nobody did.”



Horn, a muscular man of short stature, was known for having a poor stock of small talk, however nature compensated him with a will of steel or as some saw it, a dogged persistence. Prior to the unit’s sudden departure into the wilderness he was to be promoted to sergeant any

day. By the time they finished talking, most of the crew awakened and started getting out of the tents and personnel carriers. It was too late for the lieutenant to ascertain who slept in the tent and who in the armor plated vehicle. Field kitchens were set up among the trees. The lieutenant climbed the hill carrying the hot meal for the radioman. There had been no messages from headquarters. At the time of the departure of his unit north the lieutenant was given numbered and sealed envelopes, now locked in the strong box. Upon receiving the proper coded message he was to open one of them and carry out the orders it contained. He was also ordered to maintain total radio silence, which included not to contact headquarters until the mission was completed unless instructed otherwise. Looking down toward the encampment, most of it was not visible at this angle, he saw the sergeant walk along the periphery of the grove of pines. He had noticed already a disharmony between the sergeant's athletic bony body frame and the way he moved it. He would make small steps as he ran slowly with his forearms raised above the waistline and his hands dangling loose. It seemed to the lieutenant, that by trying to imitate lightness, the sergeant strove to bring out the raw strength of his body. Though the lieutenant noticed it first a few days ago, it only now began to bother him. It resembles a swine's trot, it dawned upon him. He turned the other way. From the top of the hill the view extended to the green hilltops overgrown with bushes and stunted trees till the line of the horizon. It was a fascinating panorama to a city dweller. The lieutenant tried to concentrate on what was in front of his eyes, but he could not get rid of the thought that had been with him

since last night like a toothache. The stone hut was already casting a long shadow when the sergeant climbed to the top.

“We’ve got a little problem,” rather than to report, he announced. “Two guys got gastroenteritis; I gave them kapectate.”

He worked in a hospital once. As he moved his hands, the thick rings on his fingers glimmered in the rays of the rising sun. Upon hearing this, the lieutenant tried to maintain a poker face, but apparently was not successful, since the sergeant added in a tone in his voice that sounded to the lieutenant more patronizing than informative.

“Nothing to worry about, they will be better by nightfall.”

As soon as the sergeant left for the camp, radioman Bob turned to the lieutenant.

“Sir, It must be food poisoning, they were OK last evening before they ate the canned food.”

“Sounds like it,” said the lieutenant, not willing to continue the subject matter.

In his mind he reviewed the symptoms of radiation disease. As the day moved on a few more soldiers fell sick. The lieutenant went down the hill seemingly to assess their condition, but having something else on his mind. How to find out what he did not know while not risking to reveal what he suspected. Asking straight questions would require sharing his concern with the soldiers, and that might stir up panic and render the unit unfit for action. Asking the same question and not sharing his concern would create in the minds of his crew doubts as to the mental clarity of their commanding officer. He was promoted to this position only

recently and this would be the worst time to stumble in full view. And the question to ask everyone was – where did you sleep last night? There must be some round about way to dig out the facts, he pondered. Once back in the woods the lieutenant first came upon a pale looking soldier sitting on a fallen tree trunk, discomfort painted on his face.

“What’s wrong soldier?” “ Sir, it’s my belly.”

“Your belly?” “ Yes sir.”

“What’s wrong with it?” “ Sir, it feels like there is a dead fish in it.”

“How do you know what it feels like to have a dead fish in your belly?”

“Sir, my neighbor died from eating a rotten fish.”

“What did you have for breakfast?” “ I could not eat sir, food smells like rotten fish.”

Seeing that he was not getting the information he was looking for, the lieutenant changed the subject.

“How did you sleep last night?”

“I slept good sir, until my belly woke me up.”

The second soldier lying on the carpet of the dry rusty pine needles of yesteryear next to the same fallen tree trunk and looking no less pale, tried to lift himself at the sight of his commanding officer.

“Belly ache,” asked the lieutenant.” “Yes, sir.”

“Did you both eat out of the same can?”. “No, sir.”

“Did both of you sleep in the same tent or in the same personnel carrier? “.

“No sir, we slept in different tents.” The sergeant stepped out from behind a clump of bushes. His appearance interrupted the inquiry. It did not pass unnoticed by the lieutenant, that the mere sight of the sergeant had a more

reanimating effect upon both indisposed soldiers than the sight of him, their commanding officer. They both assumed body posture more becoming to soldiers on duty. With the nod of his eyes, not as much as his head, the lieutenant indicated he wanted to talk on the side. The sergeant seemed not notice it, as he did not react, which left the lieutenant no choice but to put into words what the body language failed to communicate. They stepped out from under the trees outside of earshot of the soldiers.

“Something is wrong,” said the lieutenant, giving preference to this rather assertive statement instead of an outright question. In reality it was a question disguised as a statement and the hidden question was – what shall we do about it?

“Mountain out of a molehill,” retorted the sergeant, it was up for anyone’s guess, whom he was holding responsible for inflating the hill to the size of a mountain.

Not knowing for sure if he meant him or the soldiers, the lieutenant chose not to ask for a clarification and by saying – “we’ll see“-left the ends hanging loose,

The stone hut was basking in the full sun, a soothing mild breeze wafted through its missing windowpanes and door, cooling down the interior and clearing out the damp air. At the sound of the lieutenant’s footsteps, Bob, the radioman, perked up.

“No messages he reported quickly.” Then detecting a touch of preoccupation in his chief’s face, added - “how are things over there, down the slope?”

The lieutenant disregarded the informal mode of being addressed by his subordinate and decided to share some of his thoughts.

“A few men are sick, it’s either food poisoning or radiation injury, both may look alike, at least at the beginning. He paused briefly. Those who slept in personnel carriers were most certainly protected by the armor; the others most likely were not. I might be wrong. Perhaps there was no radiation at all. The simplest thing to do would be for me to ask every man individually where he slept last night. I cannot do it without stirring a lot of confusion. This is where you come in. I want you to go down to the camp, mingle with the guys and find out if the sick ones slept under no protection of the armor and also find out who slept in the personnel carriers and who under the tents.”

Bob left and the lieutenant placed himself by the transceiver. The time was dragging on, the shadow of the hut grew already longer, when the footsteps sounded outside. The lieutenant, stiff from having been scrunched up, stepped outside. It was Bob bringing him a hot meal and the news of one more case of malaise. He had not as yet completed his mission and quickly returned to the camp. Next appeared the sergeant. He expressed no concern about a few cases of what he now considered to be intestinal flu rather than food poisoning. He conducted his own investigation and based this conclusion on the fact that out of several men who ate out of the same can, there was only one to develop gastrointestinal symptoms and mild malaise. While proving his point he moved his hands. In the yellow rays of the setting sun the rings on his fingers glimmered like brass knuckles made of real brass.

“How do you feel?” asked the lieutenant, putting the accent on “you”, and not waiting for the answer, as if in

passing, added, "sleeping in a tent practically on bare ground with permafrost just a few feet down below must be chilling."

"Not in a tent, I had a few good hours of sleep in the personnel carrier, it wasn't cold," explained the sergeant.

So, you were not exposed to the radiation, silently concluded the lieutenant.

The sun already sank below the horizon and the first still dim stars dotted the eastern sky, when Bob returned from his secret mission. It was a success. He sat down and wrote two lists each containing about equal number of names of those who slept under the tents and those who slept under the protection of the armor. Next to the sick ones, he put crosses. Now it became clear. All the men marked with the crosses slept in tents. He was unable to establish the location of the sergeant and a few men during that fateful night.

"What about corporal Horn?" asked the lieutenant, "he slept under a tent," said Bob.

Hardly had the red afterglow of the sunset faded away from the western sky, when a radio message arrived warning of nuclear attack.

With the onset of darkness, the birds nesting in the branches stopped chirping and the insects' buzzing and whirring were no longer heard. The stillness of the night was shattered by a few bursts of gunfire. By the time the lieutenant dashed out of the stone hut, not even a faint echo lingered in the valley. There was no way to tell where the sound of the fusillade came from. Muffled, faint voices reached the top of the hill, some of them sounded high pitched, as if foreign. The lieutenant quickly dispatched

Bob toward the camp with instruction to be cautious and return promptly. He watched Bob's silhouette and his shadow as they moved in the moonlight like Siamese twins until both disappeared in the shade of the pine grove. He expected an instant return of his radioman. Minutes were dragging on and there was no sign of life to be detected on the moonlit grassy terrain all the way down to the first line of trees. The voices became even fainter. The lieutenant did not know what to do next. His military education did not cover the situation he found himself in. Should he leave the transceiver and go down to the camp, he might be overwhelmed by whoever just arrived there and nobody would be left to alert the headquarters. As a commanding officer where should he be...at his command post up the hill or with his troops down the slope. Suddenly a maxim once heard at cadet school darted across his mind – when you do not know what to do, wait and see...immediately followed by another one...that no decision is worse than a wrong decision. He got his gun at the ready and placed himself inside the hut by the window, even though he rejected the thought of his unit having been overrun so fast. Two shadows broke off the black mass of the pine grove and moved toward the hill. Soon one turned back and the other proceeded. Bob returned from his mission in an upbeat mood, more animated than his usual down in the mouth self. The shadow that turned back was the sergeant. Upon entering the camp Bob encountered a group of civilian refugees from a not too far away Eskimo village, mostly young women and children. Bob temporarily put on the back burner the completion of the second leg of his mission. That delay of his returning in due time back to the

top of the hill forced the lieutenant to make his first combat decision. The lieutenant was so relieved seeing Bob, that he could not bring himself to reprimand him. He listened to Bob's report without saying a word until it came to Bob's extolling the charms of one of the girls.

"How could you see all those details in the darkness of the night," the lieutenant interrupted him.

"She stood in the full moonlight," exclaimed Bob, "I saw her as clear as you can see."

"Beware of the women in the moonlight," broke in the lieutenant.

Unperturbed by this interruption, Bob continued. She told him her name was, she spelled it, M-I-Y-A X; he shortened it to Mia; he knew right away she took a liking to him, they were on the same wavelength. Love at first sight despite darkness or because of it, it occurred to the lieutenant. Having left Bob by the transceiver, he started down toward the camp. From the hill in the eerie light he descended into the blackness of the forest, where he learned what had happened. Upon hearing voices the guards sounded the alarm by firing a few volleys in the air. The sergeant had decided to allow the civilians to stay overnight by the camp and the soldiers already pitched a few tents for them. The lieutenant accepted the sergeant's advice to detain the civilians in case they rejected the hospitality offer. If they continued their trek, they would reveal the location of the unit. The possible presence of the enemy's agent among them should be another reason for detention, the sergeant brought it up. The fact that the civilians were Canadian citizens and the unit was American did not matter under the circumstances. The lieutenant

asked about Mia. Despite only few moonlight rays penetrating the canopy of the branches he could see she was attractive; more so, her melodious accented voice had to him the undertone of a girl seeking a protector.

As soon as the rays of the rising sun dispersed the darkness inside the stone hut, Bob hurried down to the camp to fetch the breakfast. The lieutenant was sure he would not miss this opportunity to see his love at first sight, the girl in the moonlight. He returned very soon and empty-handed. Breakfast wasn't ready yet. Obviously he did not avail himself of the opportunity to spend some time with Miss Mia. The lieutenant left Bob sitting by the transceiver and went down the hill to the camp. Upon entering the woods he saw the sergeant standing side by side, knee to knee, with Miss Mia. The daylight that filtered through the screen of the evergreen needles was no less effective than the moonlight in revealing her best. She found a protector in no time flat, it occurred to him. Bob would be very disappointed, if he is not already, when he learns about having been displaced by a higher rank. The sergeant left Miss Mia and started toward the lieutenant, while she quickly faded away behind the trees and shrubs.

“Nice girl,” remarked the lieutenant.

“She is the brightest of them all and the most fluent in English,” said the sergeant. The lieutenant did not let him get off so lightly and continued... “she's got lots of charm, charm of innocence”...he scanned his brain for a saying that would be sarcastic enough and thus would constitute a hint to the sergeant “leave her alone”. So he added...”like a morning glory or flower of a wild rose.” While saying it he

realized it sounded gushy, but nothing better crossed his mind. The counter punch was not long in coming.

“My foot,” said the sergeant,” they all are the same, the wild roses, stem roses and the morning after morning glories. There is a four Fs principle lieutenant, have you ever heard it?...find them, feel them, fuck them, forget them. And this innocent rose knows more than her looks tell you.”

Thus this subject matter was exhausted with the sergeant having the last word and the lieutenant being fully aware of who won. Without a pause they changed the subject; what to do with the civilians and both agreed to continue the detention as it was necessary for the safety of the unit. Back on the hill the lieutenant relieved Bob, who right away went down the slope. And then the message arrived: follow the instruction in envelope number 7 and the second message – corporal Horn promoted to sergeant. The lieutenant opened the portable strong box, took out the sealed envelope, aware that it contained the future of everyone in his unit. The order read: get the unit combat ready and ready to march off.

Bob returned, there were all unmistakable signs carved on his face that he had met defeat. Obviously, sergeant, the womanizer, must have gotten the upper hand, thought the lieutenant. Soon a new message arrived. Both decoded it: target area square number 48. The lieutenant opened the strong box, took out the map and located the indicated square. Another message - maintain present base for rendering first aid. The commanding officer to remain at the base. Enemy’s sea borne force approaches square 48. Prevent landing at any cost.

“At any cost, repeated Bob,” in a tone of voice, as if he were unsure what it meant.

“Yes, at any cost,” confirmed the lieutenant.

“Which means exactly what?” asked Bob, “cost of...”

“Cost of blood, simple as that,” interrupted the lieutenant raising his voice.

“I hope it’s their blood,” said Bob.

“No,” the lieutenant lowered his voice, “their blood is at no cost, it’s ours that costs.”

A short silence followed broken by Bob.

“So some guys will march to the square 48 and some won’t.”

At that moment the lieutenant wished he could discuss the operational matters with someone else, not with his radioman. Suddenly he realized that Bob, from a subordinate, became his sounding board if not a confidant.

“Yes,” he agreed, “some will stay in the camp and some will march to the square 48 and the lucky ones will return.”

“How about the sick ones?” Bob pressed on.

“Of course, they will remain in the camp,” the lieutenant said without giving it a thought. Then it darted through his mind; if those few had been exposed to the radiation, a lethal dose, does it matter what they die from, from a bullet in a few hours or from radiation sickness in a few weeks, a few months, a few years.

He turned to Bob.

“Get me the lists you made this morning of those who slept under tents and those who slept in the personnel carriers.”

Bob sensed the change of tone, it firmed up. The lieutenant looked at the two columns of names, looked and looked. He had never thought he would ever be in a position to decide who is to live and who is not; to be forced to make this decision. During his time in the military school this subject was never broached, not directly at least. How do you select others for a near certain death, what criteria to use? He had known his men only a short time, but it did not seem to make the task any easier. He pondered and pondered until it became clear to him that he did not have to carry any selection. It was made already, in heaven or in hell. Those who slept under tents and presumably were exposed to the radiation would march to the square 48. He turned to Bob.

“Run to the camp, tell the sarge to assemble the unit in the clearing and to come here.”

Soon, Sergeant Thorpe climbed up the hill.

“What’s up,” he asked.

The lieutenant first showed him some of the decoded dispatches. “You will command the assault unit because of your authority among the men, I cannot appoint corporal Horn to lead the men because of his low rank. It is an action of such importance, that I could not justify to the higher-ups putting a corporal at the helm.”

Then they poured over the map for a long time. Bob returned and remained outside the hut and entered only after sergeant Thorpe had left.

“Sir, did both of you decide who is to march to the square 48?”

A smell of beer tickled the lieutenant’s nose.

“No, I shall make that decision, matter of fact I made it already...in my mind.”

The lieutenant pulled out of his pocket the list written up by Bob yesterday morning. “Those who slept in the tents and were exposed to radiation will march on. Set the transceiver on recording, you go with me.”

“Why send into combat such a small unit as ours?” asked Bob.

“They send many small units separately in order to avoid a great concentration of troops, which are more vulnerable to nuclear attack, that’s why.”

“What’s my assignment?” asked Bob on the way down the slope.

“You will stay here and have more opportunity to see the girl you met under the full moon.” He paused...”Sergeant Thorpe will lead the assault unit.

Having said it, he obliquely glanced at Bob. A touch of blush showed on his face.

In the clearing the platoon was assembled in a semicircle, combat ready, the muzzles of their guns aiming at the blue sky. Soldiers, some joking and laughing, perhaps were covering up their tension, as they already guessed what was up. At the moment the lieutenant came forth into view, sergeant Thorpe ordered:

“Fall in! attention!”.

The silence was instantly restored save for the hum of the wind in the treetops. Then the sergeant stepped toward the lieutenant, came to attention, saluted and reported the condition of the unit. Having ordered “at ease”, the lieutenant explained in detail what the action was about. The essence of it was, to prevent a superior force from

landing ashore, at any cost, until reinforcements arrived, at any cost, he repeated. “At any cost” was the key phrase and in no one’s mind was there any doubt what it meant. Then the lieutenant announced, that Sergeant Thorpe would be the leader and read the names of those assigned to him. Upon hearing their names, the soldiers crossed over the clearing and stood in formation behind the sergeant. Now it was sergeant’s turn to address his troops. He outlined the route across the terrain with no roads passable for the heavy equipment they had, a terrain seldom traversed by humans except for the locals, the Eskimos. The sergeant took a breath and continued.

“It is easy to get lost in those woods and hills, there is not much more to follow than moose tracks. So, I decided to take with us a guide who knows the area and speaks the local language as well as English. I looked for one among the civilians and found the right one that meets all three requirements. It is Miss Mia.”

“She volunteered to accompany our unit during this dangerous mission and to share with us the hardships of a soldier’s life.”

There was a noticeable stir among the soldiers. Some looked toward Bob, whose face turned pale, then red and pale again. The lieutenant overheard a whisper coming from behind.

“My foot, how about the fourth requirement, some hardship” - to which another whisper responded – “don’t make me laugh, hard-on hardship.”

The lieutenant looked at Bob whose eyes were riveted to a tree stump at his feet; he must have heard it too. No

sooner than the lieutenant took his eyes off Bob, he heard him yell.

“Take it easy, sarge...take it easy, you won’t get too far, your balls are burned, burned.”



The lines of the soldiers stirred like reeds struck by a gust of wind. All the heads were turned toward Bob, who abruptly fell speechless as if for lack of stronger words. Everyone was dumbfounded over such a break of military discipline. No one had the faintest idea what it was about. Now the lieutenant remembered that his radioman smelled of beer shortly before. The sergeant was the first to break the silence.

“What’s the matter with this man? ” he spoke slowly, “I do not say soldier, because his behavior does not become a soldier.”

It darted across lieutenant's mind to have his radioman escorted away, before he blubbered out more, but away to where? It was too late anyway. Following the outburst Bob looked deflated and when addressed by the sergeant in a less stern voice "what's the matter with you?", all he was able to do was to stammer out the word "radiation."

"Radiation," repeated the sergeant in amazement turning to the lieutenant. "This man is nuts or drunk or something."

"Yes, radiation is the word," said the lieutenant, as calmly as he could, seeing that the lid on Pandora's box has cracked open and could not be slammed shut. Every one's eyes, which thus far shifted back and forth between Bob and the sergeant, now riveted on the lieutenant. "Yes, radiation is the right word," he repeated struggling what to say next. Wherever he looked, he saw eyes glued to his face. He lost the sense of time, and when he regained it, nothing changed, as if time stood still.

Then he spoke up.

"Our unit has been exposed to radiation, the intensity of which is not known; it happened the other night, while everybody was in deep sleep following the long march, in deep sleep including the guards. The next day a few men developed symptoms of illness, symptoms characteristic of radiation exposure."

The sergeant broke in. "What you are saying is, that we received a dose of radiation, which will kill us all sooner or later."

"This may be right."

The hush fell upon the men.

"How do you know it?"

“I saw a glow of an unusual intensity and texture in the sky followed by a gust of wind, it could not have been anything else but a nuclear explosion. So I concluded that those sleeping in personnel carriers were protected by armor, but the men under tents were not.”

“And those few who are sick now? ” asked the sergeant. “They slept under tents.”

A long silence followed broken by the sergeant.

“All who slept under tents the first night over here, raise your right hand !”

All but a few, standing behind the sergeant, raised their hands.

“Put your hand down,” he ordered; “now, those who slept in personnel carriers raise your right hand.”

Dozens of hands went down and dozens went up.

The lieutenant and Bob stood together. The sergeant turned to them.

“Sir, you and our radioman, the two of you did not raise your hands either way.”

The lieutenant sensed his leadership was being challenged; was he up to something or wasn't he, this sergeant?

“We stayed in the hut,” he answered, wondering what's next.

“Do you think the stone walls offered both of you enough protection, considering the windows and the door.”

“All I can say, at the time of the explosion we were not situated in the line of the radiation.”

Horn, a stickler for discipline and drill, was unaware of his recent promotion to sergeant, which the lieutenant has

not yet revealed. He stepped forward, came to attention and saluted.

“Sir, corporal Horn would like to ask a question.” After the lieutenant nodded signifying assent, Horn continued.

“I can see that all the men exposed to the deadly radiation are assigned to the mission “square 48”, shall I call it, a mission of no return. I understand a soldier’s sacred duty is to die for his country if necessary, but should he die twice.”

The rows of soldiers stirred and lost their straight alignment. Some fixed their eyes on Horn, as if waiting to hear more from him. Others, expecting a response, looked at the lieutenant. Having a sense of foreboding about the way things were going, the lieutenant in turn looked at his next in command. However the sergeant stood puzzled staring at Horn. No response was forthcoming. In the minds of the soldiers, their leaders’ silence might be taken for an admission that corporal Horn was right. The lieutenant grew more worried; the time was running out fast. What Horn said was pure nonsense, but there was also some bizarre logic to it that might appeal to some. Obviously, by pointing toward injustice he was trying to turn men’s heads. Dying twice seemed to be more cruel than dying once. And dying twice so that others did not have to die was not just at all. Was Horn losing his mind or was he up to something. The lieutenant, whose daydream once upon a time had been to traverse the kingdom of the Snow Queen on a sleigh pulled by a reindeer, now wished he were somewhere else. Horn’s words did not fall on deaf ears entirely judging by the confusion setting in the ranks. The soldiers, who were irradiated, assembled behind the

sergeant no longer stood in a straight line, their formation resembling more a surface of a sea stirred by a strong wind. Those behind the lieutenant, who had not been exposed to the radiation, retained somewhat more of a military order. In contrast with the silence of their leaders, the hum of the soldiers' low key voices, both of those destined to die soon and of those not to, rose around the forest clearing. Aware that he could not count on any help from the sergeant and seeing that the unit started on the way of disintegration, the lieutenant was forced to take the initiative in his hands.

“Soldiers! Today I faced the most difficult decision of my military career. I received an order to immediately select a group for a highly dangerous mission. I could do it alphabetically, by the first letters of the last names, starting with A or with Z - but it would not have been just; or by the last letters of the first names; or by drawing straws; or by selecting for the mission those I know less and keeping in the camp those I know better and like more. So I made this decision which assures the highest survival rate for the men of our unit, so help me God.” Long silence followed, interrupted by a single voice rising from the ranks behind the sergeant.

“Sir, I have a question.”

“You may speak.”

“During that night I slept in a personnel carrier, so I wasn't exposed to the radiation, but I got assigned to the suicide mission anyway. There are three of us here, who were not exposed, can we cross to the other side.”

“You may.”

The three men walked across the clearing and joined the ranks behind the lieutenant. Anger flashed across the

sergeant's face. He turned toward those standing behind the lieutenant and presumably untouched by the radiation.

“Any one who slept under a tent on that night and was exposed, cross over and stand behind me.”

No one moved.

“I know that there are among you, standing behind the lieutenant, a few who got a dose of radiation and belong to me.”

Still no one moved. Then the sergeant, in a voice mixing anger and contempt, said, “I was not exposed myself, but I am not crossing over to the lieutenant's side, I am going to lead the brave. He paused. My detachment is short of men, I need a few volunteers. Volunteers step forward.”

After a long tense moment two, then three, four soldiers stepped forward out of the lieutenant's ranks, then more and more, everybody stepped forward. . The sergeant turned to his own men who had been irradiated.

“You can see with your own eyes, that I have enough volunteers to replace most of you. Whoever feels too weak to endure the upcoming hardships, raise your hand.”

One hesitant hand went up in the air, then two, three...and more and more with less and less hesitation. The sergeant silently counted the raised hands and calmly remarked, his voice seething with contempt.

“Knowing that you all have suffered a radiation shock, I did not ask you to step forward out of consideration for your weakness, I asked you to stick up one hand only, sticking up one hand or both for that matter takes less effort than making a few steps.”

The lieutenant was stunned at what he witnessed, a sudden change of heart, normal brave men becoming lifeless cowards. He must address his men if he wants to still be seen as their leader. It crossed his mind to say something about 300 Spartans at Thermopylae, who knew they were all dead, before they died fighting.; were they made of a different stuff? He rejected this idea out of hand – who knows the history, nobody would understand it; it would make even more damage. As he feverishly searched his mind for the right words, corporal Horn rescued him with a question.

“Sir, do you consider us, standing here behind the sergeant, as I may say...he paused...walking dead?”

There is no room for evasions, thought the lieutenant and he responded.

You called a spade a spade, corporal Horn. Let me tell you a story, it happened two hundred years ago or more, during a battle, Prussian grenadiers started fleeing in fright. Their king, Frederick, later known as the Great, angry, tried to stop them, and he yelled at them...you dogs, you want to live forever... and they stopped running. I can tell you another story...two thousand years ago or more, a big Asiatic Persian army invaded Greece, hordes of them, and the small Greek Army being almost surrounded had to pull back. Then, three hundred Greek soldiers called Spartans, decided to defend a pass in the mountains knowing that there was no way out for them, and they stopped the Asians long enough to allow their own army to reach safety and they saved their country. And they all died, but their names live and are remembered till now, as the greatest soldiers ever.”

As the lieutenant spoke the murmur of the voices and the rustle of the shuffling boots stopped. He finished and the silence followed. The lieutenant ordered Bob up the hill to pick up new messages. Sergeant Thorpe walked up to the lieutenant, whispered, and both went to the side to have a council.

“It was a good fairy tale,” said the sergeant,” it worked, so far. I still don’t understand these young guys, walking dead. My foot, if you are already dead, you have nothing to lose, you should fear nothing, milquetoasts, weaklings, that’s all I can say.”

“I will put it differently,” said the lieutenant. “Exposure to radiation destroyed their future, how can you live without a future?”

“Some future” retorted the sergeant,” here and now generation.”

“I kept it secret, even from you, I wanted to protect the men from the knowledge of their fate, to enable them to die as soldiers, in the field, not in a hospital bed,” explained the lieutenant.

Bob returned with two new messages: postponement of the march to square 48 until further notice and promotion of corporal Horn to a sergeant.

This message about Horn’s promotion, it’s already the second time, commented Bob.

“I never heard about it before,” said sergeant Thorpe, and, after Bob left, turning to the lieutenant, he quipped, “Horn is also a sergeant now, he slept under the tent, so I may transfer to him the command of my walking dead, he is one of them.”

Both returned to the center of the clearing. The lieutenant ordered: “fall in, attention”, read the new messages and dismissed the men. A few hours passed. The radio reported that the international conflict was solved diplomatically and military confrontation was avoided. The lieutenant himself immediately radioed the headquarters seeking confirmation of the radio communique and inquiring about the nuclear explosion. He bypassed Bob because of his previous indiscretions and inaccuracies. While he waited impatiently, the sun was sliding toward the horizon, growing larger and redder by the minute. Soon the answer arrived confirming the radio news, but no mention about the other subject. The lieutenant hurried down the slope to share the news with sergeant Thorpe, who was already climbing up the hill.

“It’s confirmed,” he exclaimed, “situation like the one during the Cuban missile crisis, the war avoided at the last moment.”

“How about the nuclear explosion?” interrupted the sergeant.

“Strangely no response,” said the lieutenant. The short silence was broken by the lieutenant, who no longer cared what the sergeant would think of him.

“I have a brain storm; let’s celebrate the peace with a bonfire.”

“Bonfire,” repeated the puzzled sergeant, “bonfires in front of the enemy are not included in the army’s operating manual.”

The sun slid already below the horizon, when the soldiers, having felled and chopped up a few trees, carried the wood to the flat top of the hill tossing it into a huge pile

by the stone hut. The lieutenant watched them for a while, then went down to the camp and asked the cooks how many civilians they had to feed.

“Thirty two, most of them women, some kids and two old geezers.”

“The supper will take place at the top of the hill,” the lieutenant told them.

Darkness enveloped the earth earlier than the day before as the storm clouds chasing the setting sun rolled over the sky, extinguishing the stars. The wood pile was lit. All of the soldiers but a few guards and the civilians carrying the food climbed up the hill, where more food awaited them. They placed themselves around the fire, civilians and soldiers separated at first. The children would not stay put at one spot, they would scamper around the pyre, the mothers chased after them, soldiers helped mothers to catch them and before long it became very informal. Miss Mia sat with the civilians, even though she had been declared by the sergeant a volunteer and thus a member of the crew. She drew most of the glances. The lieutenant pulled his pistol out of the holster, aimed it at the dark clouds and fired three shots stealing the attention from Miss Mia. Instead of delivering a speech he said:

“Soldiers and our guests; we gathered here to celebrate the peace and life. Have a good time and bon appetite.”

Horn, just promoted from corporal to sergeant, turned to the lieutenant.

“It is a good time, but not for everyone.” Sergeant Thorpe overheard it.

“You mean for the walking dead, they look hale and hearty to me.”

A soldier walked up to the lieutenant. “Sir, may I ask a question.?”

“What’s your name soldier?”

“ John Longfoot.”

“What’s your question?”

“Sir, my people in Arizona celebrate with a dance around the fire.”

The lieutenant did not let him finish. ”So you want to make a dance around the fire right here?”

“Yes sir.”

“Go ahead.,” said the lieutenant. Sergeant Thorpe recognized the soldier.” He is one of my men, a walking dead, not bad for a walking dead to want to dance.” The soldiers and the civilians sat alike around the bonfire, ate, their tongues getting quickly untied. It must have been under the influence of their surroundings, since no alcohol was available. As the heat was rising, they had to widen the circle.

The lieutenant said to Horn, “tell the people they may start dancing whenever they feel like it.” When Horn and everyone else was out of hearing range, sergeant Thorpe turned to the lieutenant lowering his voice, which was not necessary, because his words would have been drowned out by the roar of the flames and crackling of the burning logs.

“Did you plot my death by putting me at the command of the mission of no return, whereas it should have been Horn, who by then had been promoted to a sergeant, which you knew; besides Horn was supposedly irradiated and I was not.”

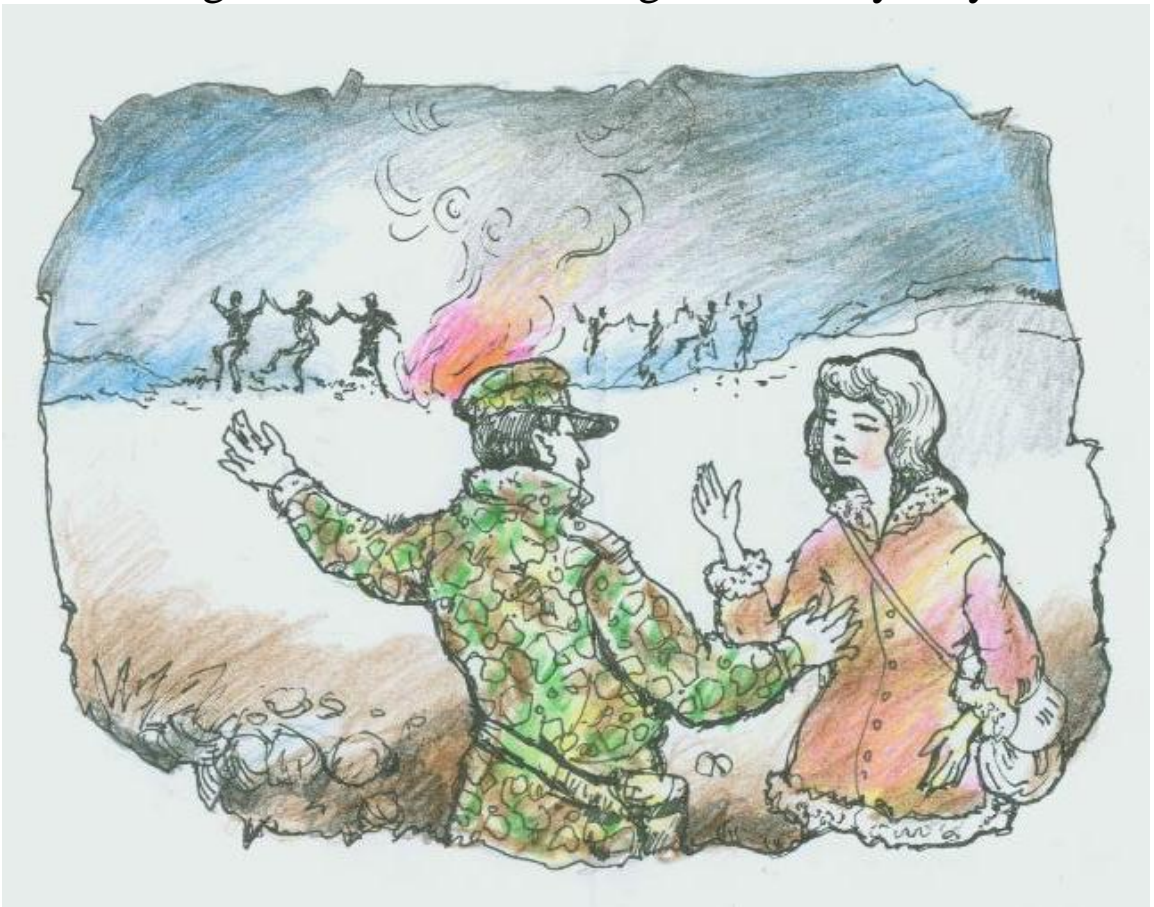
Horn completed his walk around the bonfire and rejoined them. Some of those present rose to their feet getting ready to dance, others were dilly-dallying.

“Everyone is dancing, get up, make a circle,” yelled the lieutenant,

The soldiers, girls, children and the two old geezers formed a circle.

“Hold your hands, everyone is holding hands.”

Sergeant Thorpe joined in yelling, “everybody dances, the walking dead and not walking dead, everybody.”



The lieutenant drew his pistol and pointed it toward the low lying cloud hanging overhead like a dark mirror, reflecting back to the earth the red, the orange and the yellow of the flames.

“One, two, three,” he counted out loud, fired one shot and the procession started around the bonfire. The upward draft of hot air lifted the glowing sparks high up, then the wind picked them up, carried them away into the blackness of the night and snuffed them out. The only one that had not joined in was Miss Mia; she stood aside, alone and would not enter the rotating dancing circle.

Bob ran out of the stone hut shouting, “a message from the headquarters” and handed a piece of tape to the lieutenant.

It read – there was no nuclear explosion, there was an unusual display of a powerful electro-magnetic storm. The lieutenant raised his pistol again, fired it and yelled, “everyone stop, stop!” The dancing procession came to an abrupt halt. Holding the tape in his hand, he read it out loud, waited a few seconds and exclaimed.

“So no one is a walking dead.”

“Or everyone is“, the sergeant broke in a soft voice, not audible to anyone but the lieutenant.

“Let’s all dance,” shouted the lieutenant,

“and no more shooting tonight”, added the sergeant in a soft voice, “it’s peace time.”

As the circle of the dancers moved on, Miss Mia still stood outside.

The lieutenant and the sergeant, as if touched by the same thought, looked at each other, then both walked toward Miss Mia, took her by the hands and all three joined the circle.