

CHAPTER 18

VIEW FROM THE TOP

There was always one more blow to make. That was the German military strategy. But it was insane to think he was leading his men in an attempt to take Fort Vaux, where the French garrison was still intact despite massive shelling. Lieutenant Frieslaven had few allusions. Attacks against heavily fortified positions had repeatedly failed, and yet here they were, still talking about a breakthrough, the big push, the tipping point to certain victory, the siren call that lured them on. One more major effort and the French would fold and leave the door open for the Kaiser's legions of grey to fan across the rest of France, and ultimately win the war.

In the black of night, the men of the platoon filed into position for an assault on the badge-shaped, six-sided redoubt. There were disturbing portents. The French were replacing casualties with fresh troops. This was clear. Three newly-captured prisoners from the French 72nd Infantry Division had admitted to being in the line a handful of days following their recent arrival from west of Paris. The soldiers' well-fed looks lent truth to their statements.

Of course, Douaumont had fallen with a minimum of loss in a single day. A stroke of luck perhaps, a fluke. It must have been, thought Ernst. Given what the French now knew of German intentions, what were the odds of Fort Vaux's being taken without a struggle? Could lightning strike twice?

Not likely.

It was said the capture of the fort would lead to a breakout across France. In truth, the hope of the German High Command had to be that the capture would lead to a major effort by the French to retake it, during which German artillery bombardment would decimate enemy troops, and unacceptable losses would force the French to sue for peace. For weeks, they had bled the French white as called for in the original plan. But the French had countered with more men, and the trap envisioned by German leadership had become true in reverse. The French were now bleeding the Germans white, a reality apparently beyond the grasp of the High Command. And so, shabby, ragged, hollow-eyed from lack of food and sleep, barely hanging on, the men of Ernst's thinning ranks had been ordered to mount an attack on what was considered an impregnable fortress.

If I get out of this alive, it will be a miracle, Ernst thought.

The men were halted at the edge of the Caillette Wood, where the three lieutenants, Hessler, Kruger, and Frieslaven, reported to Schröder for a briefing.

"Our men have taken the village of Vaux," the captain said. "It is up to us to capture the fort. Over this hill and down across the ravine, you will take your men to knock out the French pillbox, cut through the wire, climb the hill, and assault the fort from two sides. Carry scaling ladders with you. When you reach the walls, climb to the top and neutralize the big guns. Questions, men?"

- "When do we begin, sir?" Lieutenant Hessler said.

"Tomorrow night. We will approach under the cover of artillery. The barrage will pulverize the fort and weaken its defenses."

"When do my men get new boots?" Ernst asked. "The boots they have are rotting on their feet."

"I am not an ordinance supply officer!" Schröder snapped.

"I know, but--"

"Have your men dig an auxiliary trench, Lieutenant Frieslaven. That should keep their minds off their feet. Dismissed."

Some time later, Ernst regretted the question about boots as he watched men in need of rest dig a trench amid limbless trees. The nearby sight of an aid station being set up in a simple hole in the ground by two medical service orderlies wearing Red Cross armbands brought to mind the well-known fact that medical supplies had not kept pace with the wounded, who were often treated by medical personnel with a shrug and the depressingly familiar catch phrase: "Sorry, we do the best we can."

The severely wounded prayed to God for speedy evacuation to a rear-echelon field hospital.

"For soldiers, we certainly spend a lot of time digging."

Ernst turned and said, "These men are moles not soldiers, Jaroslav."

"We've been ordered to attack the fort. Why dig a trench here?"

"Meaning, a fallback position wouldn't be necessary if our superiors were confident of the plan's success."

"Right."

"The auxiliary trench was Schröder's idea. I'm just following orders."

"Our brave Captain Schröder." Jaroslav shook his head. "He gave Ackermann the job of knocking out the pillbox. The sergeant thinks the captain is trying to get him killed."

"Yes, I know. I intend to put Ackermann in for an Iron Cross, and put Schröder in his place."

"I owe a debt to Ackermann."

"We all do."

"Yes, but in my case, the more Schröder harasses Ackermann the less he does me."

"Better hope nothing happens to Ackermann then."

"Do you think Schröder will take part in the attack, Lieutenant?"

"Take part? I'm surprised that horse's ass is here at all!"

"True, he usually worms his way out of harm's reach."

"And after the battle results are tallied takes credit for the men's hard-won successes."

"Lieutenant?"

"Yes?"

"May I ask a favor?"

"Of course."

- "Will you see to my body if something happens to me?"

"Nothing's going to happen to you, Jaroslav."

"It's been over a year now. How long do you think our luck will hold?"

"As you would say, it doesn't help to talk like that."

"I have a feeling... I can't seem to shake the feeling that this is it for me. If I am killed, I want you to find my body. I'm not afraid of dying, but I don't want to be thrown in a pit with other dead. At the very least, a man should have the right to be buried in his own grave."

"I agree, Jaroslav."

"Then you'll look for my body?"

“Yes, just as you would mine.”

“Do you think the French know we’re here?”

“Would it matter?”

All that next day, men readied equipment for the night assault on Fort Vaux. First up the hill and out of the ravine, wire cutters would be followed by shock troops and special squads of six men -- four to provide support for the two men operating each of twelve flamethrowers. Soldiers looked on as a man strapped to his comrade’s back a four-foot-long metal cylinder with two chambers, the lower containing pressurized gas, the upper liquid flammable oil. The connected rubber tube hose with a steel nozzle and a wick device similar to that on a candle would be operated by a second man.

Jaroslav nudged Ernst, nodded at the soldier with the tank on his back, and whispered, “He’s acting as a mule.”

“Let’s hope this one has a kick.”

“Lieutenant?” The private saluted.

“Yes?”

“Captain Schröder wants you, sir.”

“Where is he?”

“If you’ll follow me, sir.”

Ernst was led to a dugout located fifty yards along a support trench being widened and strengthened by a hundred diggers with each passing hour.

“Frieslaven, here you are.”

“You sent for me, sir?”

“Yes. You will accompany Ackermann on the attack on the pillboxes. These pillboxes must be neutralized before the fort can be captured. You understand the importance?”

“I will try to do my best, sir.”

“Not good enough. An entire battalion will make this assault. We are only one part of it.”

“Yes, sir.”

- “Trying your best is the talk of a defeatist. Rephrase your commitment.”

“The pillboxes will be knocked out, sir.”

“That’s better.”

“Anything else, sir?”

“Yes indeed. The outcome tonight will determine whether you and I advance in our positions. Do you understand, Lieutenant?”

“I think so, sir.”

“There will be no failure.”

“Yes, sir,” Ernst said, thinking, so that’s why he’s here. This isn’t about country or patriotism. This is all about him and to hell with anything else, including the men sent to die.

“There will be no prisoners taken.”

“Sir?”

“You heard me. Prisoners would slow the gain of our objectives. Besides, we cannot spare the men to guard them.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Prepare your men. You may go.”

On the walk to rejoin his men, Ernst considered the illegality of Schröder's order to take no prisoners. Unfortunately, there was no one to either argue against or to later prove the captain had made it.

"What was that about?" Jaroslav asked when Ernst returned.

"Nothing worth mentioning."

"I've been looking at these woods, this small section that hasn't been hit by artillery fire. You'd think the French would have shelled us by now. They must not know we're here. Maybe we'll walk up there and take the hill without a fuss."

"Don't count on it, Private. How many times has that happened?"

"Yes, I know, I'm babbling. Sorry. The waiting is hard for me. Once we get going I'm not as afraid. Everything happens so fast. I don't have time to think about it."

"Better get over there with the other men," Ernst said. "I need to check their equipment."

"Jawohl, Herr Leutnant!" Jaroslav saluted, smiled, and said, "Just one more thing."

"What?"

"I hope you live to be a very old man."

Aged by the rigors of war, Ernst felt he already had.

He walked to and among his men, attending to their problems: a rifle jammed with rounds, a stuck safety catch on a weapon, a frozen bolt, a tear in a gas mask to repair, though Ernst wasn't sure the cotton and gun grease patch would work, and the tiresome and oft-repeated complaints over which he had no control. He offered them a small pep talk instead, not because he felt it would help, not because he believed what he was saying was true, but because in his estimation a leader was supposed to do so. It amazed him no

- end. He had no military background and less than no faith in a pleasant conclusion to this damned war, and yet still took his lieutenant duties seriously enough.

Finished with same, he found a spot to sit alone and undisturbed but for the whispers of nearby men. In this quiet time of reflection before battle, the spouting of small talk to ward off fear forgotten, insignificant, as meaningless now as the immensity of creation was profound, the men retreated within themselves and, yielding to sinister brooding thoughts, wondered whether they would live to see another sunrise. Ernst like most tried to dismiss the awful reality from his mind by thinking of something or someone else.

They waited all that afternoon, crouched in their holes. Shortly after dark, the dirty faces of the men glowed red with flares of artillery fire. Listening to the barrage, as many times as the big German guns had been heard, the scream and impact of the shells sounded oddly different to the men gazing at white-hot flashes in the night sky. The trees seemed to shriek, trees not hit before, shrapnel tearing through the trees with a hissing, slashing sound like a wheat thresher, the air filling with branches and pine needles, and the top of the mountain erupting like a volcano. Nothing, the observers told themselves, nothing could survive such a bombardment. The German soldiers hunkered in their holes waited for the signal to move, anxious to finish the fight.

Ernst, the man, felt like hunching lower, but as a platoon leader stood above his men near the freshly dug trench rampart, wondering what they would find if they made it to the top of the hill. The lights flashing off the clouds above, hypnotic in their awful beauty, green, yellow, white, or blue, based on differing types of powder, reminded him of the Chinese lanterns strung at the outdoor summer patio of a bistro on the Unter den Linden in

Berlin, a world and lifetime away.

Wire cutters and shock troops had moved out. The signal came, a silent signal this time, no shouted commands or blown whistles, a simple wave of the hand passed along the line. Ernst waved his arm. The officer beyond him waved his.

Advance!

A thousand men climbed from the protection of the trench and moved forward at a walk. This was to be a creeping barrage. If everything went according to plan, artillery would confine the French atop the hill to the bottom of their holes until German forces advanced under cover of the din for an assault.

“Hilfe! Hilfe!”

Ernst turned to see a young private struggling with a scaling ladder. He ran to him and hissed, “Dummkopf! Halt deine Fresse!”

“I’m sorry for shouting, sir, but it’s caught.”

“Stop tugging on it. You’re making too much noise. Do you want to bring the French Army down on us?”

Damned scaling ladders are a pain in the ass, Ernst cursed to himself as he hurried to free a bottom rung caught on a small stump and back to motion the soldier forward, the boy so frightened he could hardly breathe. Did the boy know his lieutenant was scared, • too? Did the men? Could they see fear in his face in the split-second shell flashes in the dark?

The trees thinned. Open landscape revealed a hill rising out of a ravine. Shell explosions lit the summit. The noise was deafening. The vacuum and back-blast created a false weather condition, a scorching wind that blew in their faces as they passed three corpses blackened and still smoking, Frenchmen unrecognizable as human beings. Flamethrowers had done their work.

The German soldiers ran toward their objective. A man fell, shot clean through the head. Despite the bombardment, enemy fire came from ahead and above.

“Take ten men and move around to the right!” Ernst commanded Ackermann. “We’ll flank the pillbox!”

Ackermann and men disappeared in the dark.

Other soldiers stumbled into French wire that had not been cut as promised. Caught and struggling, ripping clothing and skin, bleeding, panic set in.

“Wire cutters!” Frieslaven shouted. “Wire cutters!”

“Save me! Save me!” A man hit in the stomach staggered to clutch Ernst, who held him in his last few moments then lowered him to the ground.

“Move back!” he shouted. No wire cutters were forthcoming. They had to seek a way around the wire. The five men hopelessly entangled would be left behind.

“And drop those goddamn scaling ladders!” he ordered men trying to drag the ungainly ladders across and through obstructions as bullets whined overhead.

“We’ll be cut to pieces!” he yelled to Jaroslav. “Help me round up the men!”

Jaroslav and another man shoved and yanked and kicked and corralled enough of the disoriented soldiers into a semblance of military order to get others to follow the move to the right along the wire toward a distant massive hill looming above a raging fire fueled by white-heat lightning from flamethrowers licking at the base.

Ernst waved his Luger in the direction of Fort Vaux and shouted, “This way! Follow me!”

The squad reached an artillery-blasted gap in the wire that was passable but further impeded by an abatis of felled trees with interlocking tangles of branches. The outline of the fort on the hill was visible from here; the flat-topped redoubt with stone buttresses like those of a castle of antiquity shaped much like a giant mound of plow-mown peat. Brightly lit from the shells and phosphorus, a ragged tricolored flag of France flew amid the explosions at its summit.

“Forward!” Lieutenant Frieslaven commanded the living, forced to ignore the moaning and crying and pleas of Corporal Ott, lying on his back with a hole in his chest trying to cover his pulsating organs with a chunk of flesh picked up off the dirt. Too many men were dying. The corporal would soon join them.

Now on bare ground and across the treeless earth Ernst and squad climbed a steep rock-strewn slope within seven hundred yards of Fort Vaux on the opposite hill. A man...a

- Frenchman?... no, a stormtrooper with a flamethrower tank on his back...running, his body on fire, arms flailing, screams heard above the shell fire, a human torch burning fiercely.

“Bring that up here!” Ernst shouted.

A three-man crew hurried to set up a MG machine gun on a tripod.

“Grenades!” Ernst called to the men gathered on the hill, the party of survivors more of an attacking force once armed. He walked to Jaroslav, pointed at the fort’s main entrance, and said, “See that big arched doorway? If we can force our way through...”

“We’re being slaughtered here, Lieutenant. Might as well go over there to die.”

“Where’s Ackermann?”

“I don’t know.”

The sergeant had lost four men to the three French defenders of the barbed-wire-fortified pillbox; a small, conical, turtle-shaped iron shell with viewing slits; a nilpferd, one of his men had called it, a hippopotamus submerged in a pond with its eyes just above the water.

“Tell the lieutenant we’re pinned down and need more men,” Ackermann told a man he couldn’t spare, the runner turning to go as German soldiers emerged from the dark.

“Where are you headed?” Ackermann called to the stormtroopers.

“We’re falling back!”

“No! You there! Yes, you with the tank! Come with me to burn the French out of their hole!”

“Nein! Nein!”

“Take it off! I’ll operate it myself!” Ackermann faced his men. “I need one of you to go with me.”

“I will, Sergeant,” Corporal Steiner volunteered.

“Good lad! Help me with this.”

Ackermann held the petrol tank by its strap, and handed Steiner the flamethrower’s pistol-shaped spray nozzle and connecting hose. “We need cover to cut the wire and get in close,” the sergeant told his men. “When I signal, open fire with everything you have.”

The men quickly assumed positions and leveled weapons at the pillbox.

“Fire!”

Bullets ricocheted off the shell as Ackermann and Steiner crawled on their bellies to reach and cut the wire, Ackermann sliding sideways on his shoulder, dragging the petrol tank, Steiner following, both men listening to the chatter of Chauchat light machine guns, Ackermann aware that most of Fort Vaux’s heavy artillery pieces had been moved to

various Western Front locations, the enemy's second mistake, to strip Fort Vaux's hill of trees to provide a better field of fire. The runoff water from rain and melting snow had carved little gullies into the hillside. These accidental culverts allowed a quick crawl under the wire.

Close to the pillbox, Ackermann motioned to Steiner who lit a ten-second fuse at the nozzle. The extension spit a tongue of fire. The defenders of the pillbox abandoned the firing ports and sought the safety at the bottom of their bastion, where they hunkered to no • avail. Sickened by the screams of the burning men, Ackermann covered his ears with his hands until the terrible shrieking stopped, and the pillbox had been reduced to a blackened, smoking hulk. He then waved his men forward and sent the runner to report to the lieutenant.

"Where is he? Show me.

The runner pointed. "Over there, Lieutenant. The sergeant knocked out the machine gunners in the pillbox."

My God! Everything seemed possible. Fort Vaux lay just ahead.

"Move all of you! Move! Move! Move!" Frieslaven yelled as the bombardment ceased, and the hill fell silent.

Out of the dark came the cheers and shouts of hundreds of their comrades, Ernst's men one small part of the four attacking divisions of the German 5th Army charged with overtaking the fortress seemingly within reach. On they came as small-arms fire sounded from above, the rattle of French machine guns, the crack-pizz-wing of carbines.

Jaroslav went down.

Ernst ran to help him.

Jaroslav's eyes fluttered. "I'm all right."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, help me up."

Ernst and Jaroslav ran until stopped by wire at the top of the hill, where dozens of men from coalescing units fell to French gunfire as cuts were made to clear a path to the stone ramparts of the fort.

Men raced through the gap in the wire. Victory was in sight. Unseen and unexpected in the wild surge forward, the dry moat encircling Fort Vaux's stone wall filled in mere minutes with soldiers; those charging from behind pushing men in front over the edge into the deep depression, the tumbling men soon packed in the moat like sardines in a tin, their weapons useless from lack of maneuvering room against the steady crack of gunfire from above. Germans were dying in the hundreds, the onrush of soldiers like an ocean wave crashing against a seawall with nowhere to go but up without the means to do so. Scaling ladders had been left behind.

"Zurückziehen!"

The call to retreat triggered complete bedlam as soldiers spared the fall into the moat slammed into one another, clawed, and fought to escape through cut gaps in the wire, leaving trapped and entangled men to be finished off at leisure, and a carpet of grey-uniformed bodies on the hill, in the mad dash for German lines.

Slumped in a trench on the day following the failed attack, trapped in a netherworld somewhere between the living and the dead, Sergeant Ackermann stared at nothing,

- stupefied and slack-jawed, trying to forget the waste of lives while questioning the point of continued existence.

“Sergeant?”

Ackermann turned.

“Sorry to bother you,” said the private. “But could I have a word with you?”

“Sure. Sit down.”

“There’s something I need to get off my chest...something confidential.”

“What is it?”

“You promise not to tell anyone?”

“Yes, I promise.”

The boy eyed his hands. “We may have killed some of our own.”

“Accidentally?”

“No. We were ordered to fire on you and your men to turn you back to the attack. I refused, but some of the men--”

“Who gave you the order?” Ackermann snapped.

“Captain Schröder. He told us to force you back by shooting deserters.”

Ackermann abruptly stood and walked to the dugout hole to find Schröder seated at his makeshift desk across from two men. As Schröder stood to object to the sergeant’s intrusion, Ackermann landed a punch to his face that sent him sprawling on his back. The two men grabbed Ackermann’s arms before he could strike again.

“You ordered your men to fire on us!” Ackermann roared. “A dozen of my men killed, you sick bastard!”

Schröder slowly got up off the dirt. Maliciously smiling, he rubbed his jaw and said,

“I’ve got you now, Ackermann. You’re finished.”