back and forth wildly, crying and screaming. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'll stay this time. I'll work. I'll never run again."

And then a machine pistol began to pop, and blood spattered wildly. Hofmann's chest ripped open, and his throat. His clothes tore apart. He let out a shriek and then slumped forward against the ropes. Feiertag had not waited for the firing squad, not with all this wild flailing. He had simply ended everything with his own trigger finger.

But the gurgling continued, the sucking sound in Willi's chest.

Dieter gulped, tried to get his breath. He knew he had to accept this.

Dieter heard someone retch, heard a splat hit the ground, and that only set off others. In another moment, ten, then twenty or more, were down on their knees, vomiting on the ground.

And Lieutenant Feiertag was saying, "That's all right, boys. Don't be ashamed that you have to vomit. No one wanted this to happen. No one likes to see it." He paused for a time as the gurgling continued, the vomiting, and then he added, "May I trust now that not one of you will think of turning from his duty?"

# Chapter 6

The weather had turned cold, had been all through November, and now the month was nearly over. But still, the trenches were not completed. Dieter saw little enthusiasm in his boys now. They were tired of the daily drudgery, the long hours and the bad weather. But no one complained—not since they had seen what had happened to Willi. Discipline had tightened all along the *Westwall*, and rumors circulated about boys who had slacked off, been caught dawdling, and had been immediately shipped to the eastern front to fight the Russians—with winter coming on. Some said there was little difference between that and a death penalty. The Russians were rampaging across eastern Europe now, pushing the German army back. Germany's newspapers claimed that the tide was about to turn, that soldiers would never let the Russians cross onto homeland soil, and Dieter believed that, but he was shocked by the retreat

of German troops both in the east and west.

The older *HJ* boys were now being pulled out of the trenches and sent to fight as replacements on the nearby western front. The boys who were sixteen expected to join *Wehrmacht* or military SS troops once the ditches were finished. And that was Dieter's hope, even though he was still fifteen. He didn't want to be sent home, like a little boy; he wanted to be part of the action at the border, and then to see the turn of events as his countrymen took back control of the war. German troops were now gathering behind the *Westwall* with tanks and artillery. The soldiers were camped in the towns and fields in the section Dieter managed, and he heard from his leaders that German forces were also gathering all along the Luxembourg and Belgian borders. They weren't digging in, either. "They aren't taking defensive positions," Lieutenant Feiertag told Dieter. "Officers tell me, on the quiet, that they believe our troops are getting ready to attack."

It was a heady idea. For many months now, German troops had been pushed back, but now that was over. And Dieter, after talking to Feiertag, thought he saw what was coming. At



the beginning of the war, Germans had cut through the Ardennes Forest in Belgium—where no one had expected them—and then turned south, defeated France in only a few weeks, and driven English troops back across the Channel. Hitler had drawn out the Americans and British, stretching them across western Europe. Now, it appeared, he would go after them, once again through the Ardennes. It made such perfect sense. Meanwhile, the ignorant Russians, also stretched too far from their homeland, and giving up millions of lives as they fought, would finally spend their power, and Germans, with ten times the will of the Russians, would drive them back too. Dieter had heard it all from his Hitler Youth leaders before he had left home: What looked like a disaster for Germany was about to turn. It couldn't be otherwise. Germany couldn't—*wouldn't*—be defeated.

Late one evening Dieter received a telephone call at his headquarters. He got out of bed to answer the phone, and he was still only half awake when the caller identified himself as a military officer, not a Hitler Youth leader. Suddenly Dieter was alert. But the officer's message was

nothing surprising. "You are called to a conference in the morning. Early. You'll be picked up at five. Be outside."

"Yes, sir," Dieter said, and he was about to hang up the phone.

But then the man said, "Be certain you shine your boots. Wear your best uniform."

"Of course." It was what Dieter would have done anyway. What Hitler Youth leader would ever attend a meeting without looking his best?

He did arise very early the next morning, however, and he cleaned and shined his boots a little more carefully than he might have otherwise, and he took out his best uniform, the one he wore only to such gatherings, and he brushed it, made certain it looked tidy.

At five o'clock he was outside when a dark Mercedes pulled up in front of his quarters. He got inside and greeted a young officer from the *Waffen SS*. The man seemed to know very little, and didn't have much to say, so Dieter rode in silence, alone in the back. He wasn't really sure where the car traveled in the dark, but he knew it was heading into the Hunsrück range of mountains. This was unusual. Dieter had never been pulled so far from his work, never returned



so far east into Germany. He could only assume that the meeting must involve many more leaders than those in the sector where he was working.

Eventually, after passing through a couple of guard stations, where the driver had to stop and show passes and personal papers, the car headed along a gravel road that cut through a densely wooded area. A wet snow had been falling off and on, not amounting to much, but the day was grim. What Dieter saw eventually was not a building but an armored train that was parked on a side track. There were only a few cars, and yet they were connected to a large, modern diesel engine, and the train was equipped with an 88-millimeter antiaircraft gun.

When Dieter stepped from the Mercedes, an SS major checked his papers and relieved him of his pistol. Dieter, for the first time, was frightened. Had he been accused of something? Was he being arrested? He walked past a row of SS soldiers, all with automatic weapons, some with guard dogs, and then entered one of the cars of the train. There he found three other Hitler Youth leaders and some of the SS overseers who were directing the massive *Westwall* project, but

the inside of the train was even more surprising than the outside. It was paneled in oak, fitted with chandeliers, and with a beautiful mosaic of inlaid wood across the ceiling.

Dieter looked around at the other boys, who seemed as mystified as he was. No one spoke. Over the next few minutes two more Hitler Youth leaders arrived, both well dressed and equally impressed as they entered the car and stepped onto the plush, blue carpet. By then other SS and army officials had entered the car: two generals and several colonels. Only something marvelous could happen here, but still, Dieter couldn't think what it was. And then the door opened, and a man stepped in. Dieter recognized Albert Speer, one of the highest officials in the government of the Third Reich. He was the Minister of Armaments, in charge of the vast project of keeping German troops armed and ready for battle. Even the trench-digging project at the *Westwall* was ultimately under his command.

Speer smiled at the boys, nodded. They all leaped to attention, thrust their arms forward in the Nazi salute, and shouted, "*Heil,* Hitler!"

He returned the salute, casually, and he



smiled. He was a delicate man with dark, tranquil eyes and heavy eyebrows. He stood before the boys and thanked them for their excellent work in their sector, for meeting their goals in spite of the bad weather they had suffered. Dieter felt lifted, as though his feet were off the floor. His work had been worth it, and this was his reward, to be thanked in person by such a highly placed leader.

Speer spoke to the boys a few minutes. He told them that the German army was about to take its stand, that a great moment in history was at hand. "We must stop the enemy. We will do it at the *Westwall.* Your work will never be forgotten by the German people." What he added, then, was that the work was not quite finished, and he was asking these leaders to pick up the pace—to extend working hours, and to complete the final stages of the project by December 10. The boys promised they would do it, and Dieter committed in his own heart that if he didn't sleep another minute between now and then, his crews would finish their part of the project.

All this was enough, but then Speer motioned to the door. "Young men," he said, "there is someone here who wants to meet you

and thank you for your work. He has a medal he wishes to present to you."

The door opened at the end of the car, and Dieter held his breath. But he wasn't ready for what he saw. His knees almost went out from under him. The man stepping through the door was Adolf Hitler. With more awe than volume, the boys raised their arms and gasped, *"Heil, mein Führer."*

The *Führer* raised his arm quickly, from the elbow, and returned the salute. He walked over and faced the boys, who were standing in a line. Dieter had seen Hitler once before, from a distance, but never this way, standing within arm's length. But the *Führer* looked tired, and Dieter's heart went out to him. The man had been through so much. Only a few months before, a group of treacherous German generals had tried to assassinate him and had narrowly missed their mark. Hitler had the weight of this war on his shoulders, more than anyone, and Dieter was only thankful that he was one follower who was doing his share, not someone who had to face this, the greatest man in the world, in shame.

Hitler congratulated the boys in that strong voice Dieter had heard so many times on the



radio. He told them they were heroes, that they had done a wonderful job. And then his voice took on a hint of the power he could unleash at his great mass meetings. "We are about to begin a major offensive, and I promise you, we will not be denied. We'll not only defend ourselves; we'll drive our enemies back from our borders."

Dieter was right. This was what he had been telling himself. But now the *Führer* had said it, so it would be so.

Hitler then walked down the line, stopped in front of each boy. When he came to Dieter, he took his hand. Dieter was surprised at the filmy look in the *Führer's* eyes, at the uneven shave, the patch of missed whiskers on his chin, but he concentrated on the words: "Son, I know I can count on you. Bavarian boys are made of strong stuff."

*"Jawohl, mein Führer,"* Dieter said, but only in a whisper. He knew that this was the finest moment of his life, and always would be. He tried to draw it all in, think of the words, remember them. Then the *Führer* handed Dieter the medal. It was a War Service Cross, First Class, with Swords. If Dieter and the others had been members of the military, they might have

received an Iron Cross, but this was the highest honor they could receive as civilians.

It was all Dieter could do not to make a fool of himself and shed tears, but he stood firm and strong. Then the boys, still in a line, marched from the train car. And outside, Dieter could see that everyone felt just as he did. The boys all stopped and looked back at the train, as though they wanted to memorize everything they had seen and experienced. But no one said a word.

For the next two weeks Dieter pushed his crews beyond sixty hours, beyond all reason, really. He had learned to be harsh when he had to be, and his boys knew better than to defy him. But they finished their part of the assignment, on schedule, and that meant they could be home for Christmas. Dieter was glad that the others would be leaving the front before the Allies attacked, but that's not what he wanted for himself. He needed, somehow, to get in on the battle.

Every day he talked with Lieutenant Feiertag and told him that even though he was not yet sixteen, he had proved himself in his command. Now he deserved the chance to prove himself on the field of battle. His words always seemed to



fall on deaf ears, but then, on the last day before the boys were to board their train back home, Feiertag came to him, smiling. "All right. You got what you wanted. You're going to the front."

Dieter took a long breath. He was excited, and . . . something else. He didn't want to admit that he was frightened—didn't admit it—but that night he found he was too excited to sleep and, as he pictured the combat, he did worry a little. Would he actually bring honor to himself when the time came? This was no longer about fancy words and stated commitments. Now he had to put his life on the line, for real. He couldn't let himself down, couldn't fail the *Führer*.

Early the next morning Dieter wrote to his family, telling them of the honor he had received: the medal, and the chance to join the fight. He knew what his parents would think, how reticent they would be about this, and it angered him a little. But when he mentioned Christmas, and told his parents that he wouldn't be home, he felt a certain sense of loss. He thought of his little brother, Gerhardt, who was twelve now, almost thirteen. Gerhardt would be disappointed that Dieter wasn't coming home. Dieter wondered when he would see the boy

again, and have a chance to tell him all the things he had seen and done. He even found himself hoping—and feeling guilty as he did so—that Gerhardt could stay home for a few years yet, not be drawn into the war. There was nothing wrong, of course, with hoping the war would end soon and that no more German boys would have to die, but Dieter knew he was actually thinking more of Christmas and of the days when he hadn't had so much to worry about. He wanted Gerhardt to have some more years of that kind.

That morning Dieter also said good-bye to the boys under his command. He noticed no show of love from them, and he understood why—even though it bothered him a little. Couldn't they understand that he had had no choice but to drive them hard? He was taken by truck that afternoon and dropped off at a camp near Aachen. He and some other boys who had not returned home were given gear and uniforms, and a place to sleep, and then they spent the next day being processed into the army. On the following morning he and the others were hauled south to another camp and, without any training other than what they had received in



Hitler Youth, were suddenly members of a company of soldiers in the Forty-seventh *Panzer* Corps, part of the Fifteenth Army.

A young *Feldwebel*—a sergeant—took Dieter to a tent, helped him stow his equipment, and then said, "This is Corporal Schaefer. He'll look after you—tell you what to do."

A big man, older—maybe forty-five or so—was sitting on his cot. He was dark-haired, except for some graying around his ears. His whiskers, not shaved for a few days, were also tinted with gray. But what Dieter saw was the lifelessness in his eyes, his face, the absence of interest in Dieter's arrival. He was sitting on a little stool, and he had a sheet of paper on his lap, with a wooden ammunition box under it, for a writing surface. He had apparently been writing a letter.

"I'm Dietrich Hedrick," Dieter said, and he held out his hand.

Schaefer looked toward Dieter but didn't seem to see him. "Johann Schaefer," he said. He gave Dieter's hand a quick shake.

"I'm glad to be here. From all I hear, something big could be coming in this sector."

Schaefer's eyes finally focused on Dieter. "How old are you?" he asked.

Dieter couldn't bring himself to tell the truth. His sixteenth birthday was not so many months off, however, so he said, "Sixteen, but I've been commanding one-hundred eighty men for months now. We've been fortifying the *Westwall*."

"Hitler Youth?"

"Yes." Dieter saw the doubt in the man's eyes, the skepticism. "Don't worry about me, Corporal," he said. "I'm ready to fight. I know I'm young, but I'm not afraid."

"That's just the trouble," Schaefer said softly, but not with any interest. He looked back to his paper.

"I don't mean that I'll be rash. I won't take chances. I'll follow you experienced men and learn from your example."

Schaefer was writing now, not seeming to notice that Dieter was talking.

"Is this a strong unit, the Forty-seventh?"

Schaefer was once again slow to react, but finally, without looking up, he said, "No. It isn't. It's patched together. We're only at about half strength. We're short on tanks and trucks and artillery. And we have no air support."

Dieter was stunned to hear a German soldier say such a thing. "Surely, such negative talk won't help matters, Corporal," Dieter said. "Surprise—



and courage—can make up for other shortages."

Schaefer looked up once again, and this time he focused clearly on Dieter, studied him. "You shouldn't be here, a young boy like you," he said, his voice actually taking on a kindly tone.

"I'll fight as well as anyone in the company. I promise you that."

"You don't know that. You have no idea what you'll do. You don't understand what you've gotten yourself into here."

And now there was not just kindness but sadness in the man's voice. Dieter was unnerved. He turned away. He began unpacking his bag of equipment. Schaefer had the wrong attitude, of course; there could be no question about that. But the man didn't sound like a bad person. Maybe he was simply discouraged. Dieter decided not to judge him too severely. He finished arranging his things, and then he asked, "Where have you fought before, Corporal?"

"Russia."

"How did you end up on this front?"

Schaefer seemed hesitant to have this conversation, but he said, "I was shot through the chest. I was in a hospital for eight months. When I got out, they sent me here."

"You've been through plenty, Corporal. You're

a hero—a great German hero. It's an honor for me to fight alongside you."

Schaefer may have smiled, just a hint, but he didn't say anything. Dieter knew what he must be thinking: that Dieter was all talk but not someone worthy to fight with grown men. He thought of telling Schaefer about the medal he had received from the *Führer* himself, of the danger he had already faced in the trenches. But this old corporal may only see that as more talk. Dieter knew the only proof would come when he showed his valor under fire. But he couldn't resist saying, "Corporal, you'll learn to trust me. I promise you that. I'm not afraid to die."

"It's not death that's frightening," Schaefer said. "You'll soon find out what's worse."

The words penetrated, and took some of Dieter's breath away. "I'll be all right," he said quietly, after a moment. But he felt a strange gloom come over him. He hadn't expected such a thing, not after meeting Adolf Hitler himself, not after vowing his allegiance to the *Führer*, face-to-face. Dieter knew he had to be careful. Soldiers like Schaefer were dangerous. They could break down a man's resolve. His leaders in *HJ* had warned him about such people.

For the next few days Schaefer didn't say much, but when he did speak, he almost always had something negative to say. Dieter finally decided he had heard enough. The man had been through a lot, but he was a dangerous influence on the entire company. Dieter went to the company commander, Captain Schmidt. He quoted Corporal Schaefer word for word, described his sentiments about the operation that was about to begin, and then he said, "If we go into battle, how can we tolerate a man like that? His attitude could infect the others. It's the sort of pessimism that could destroy us."

The captain was sitting at his desk in a big field tent. He let Dieter stand before him, straight and correct, and for a time he merely stared at him. But then he said, "Hedrick, you let me worry about Schaefer."

"But it's your responsibility to—"

Schmidt suddenly stood up. "Don't ever try