

86 SOLDIER BOYS

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.

CHAPTER 7

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

to tell me what my responsibility is, young man. You worry about your own."

"Yes, sir."

"And I'll tell you this. Schaefer knows more about fighting than you ever will. You stay close to him and listen to everything he tells you. Then I won't have to worry about you. If I could ship you out of here right now, I would. I don't need children in my company."

Dieter was stunned. Shamed. He couldn't believe a *Wehrmacht* officer could say such a thing—*think* such a thing.

"Now get out of here."

Dieter saluted and said, "Heil, Hitler" with force—as a rebuke. The day would come when he would prove himself as a soldier, and then he would see that heads rolled in this company. He hadn't met a soldier he was sure he could count on yet. Too many of them grumbled and complained. If any of these men had had to stand before the *Führer*, as Dieter had done, they would hang their heads. But he was finished with trying to change them. He would lead by example and hope for the best. It was becoming clearer every day that preparations were over and a battle was coming. Brave men would have

to step forward then and show the others what was needed.

That afternoon Captain Schmidt called the company together. The soldiers stood outside in the cold as he spoke to them in a voice that seemed to Dieter entirely too soft, too calm. "Men, we start our campaign in the morning," he began. "We'll cross the river with our tanks ahead of us. But we must keep up with the tanks, and they will be moving fast. The idea is to surprise the *Amis* and make a powerful forward thrust. Our battalion will lead out and forge a salient that other battalions will fill."

Dieter liked the idea, and he was pleased when Schmidt's voice took on a little more force. "Men, this is very important. These Americans across the way are the weakest troops in Europe. They're spread thin, and they're inexperienced. If we come with full force, they'll back away. They'll turn and run. What we're part of is the great reversal of the war. This will be something you can tell your grandchildren—that you were the ones who stopped the losses, turned the war around."

So the captain was not such a coward after all. This was the sort of speech Dieter had been hoping for. What he didn't like was what he saw

around him. The men were silent. No one cheered or shouted, "Heil, Hitler," as Dieter wanted to do. The soldiers stood in the cold, their breaths puffing steam into the air, and they hardly moved. Dieter wondered why he hadn't been sent to an SS unit so that he could be among men who truly loved the *Führer*.

Back at the tent, after the meeting, Schaefer helped Dieter, showed him what to take and what to leave behind. Dieter knew better than to say too much about the next day's battle, but he did say, "Corporal, that was a fine speech the captain gave, wasn't it?"

"I've heard lots of speeches," Schaefer said.

"But don't you think it's brilliant, this surprise? The last thing the Americans expect is for us to attack. They'll be caught off guard, for certain,"

"Maybe. But listen to me. When we move out, you stay with me. Don't do anything foolish. Let the tanks do the work. If I drop to the ground, you drop. Don't start running into battle without looking where you're going."

"I'd rather be too brave than too cautious, Corporal. No one ever won a war by acting like a scared little rabbit."

Suddenly Schaefer's hand shot out and gripped the front of Dieter's coat. The big man jerked Dieter close, and he spoke into his face, his stinking breath coming in gusts. "You win wars by killing *them*. The *Amis*," he shouted into Dieter's face. "Not by getting *yourself* killed. And if you think those Americans are a bunch of scared rabbits, you don't know what you're talking about. They don't want to die either. They want to kill you."

"I know all that. I'm not about to get myself shot for no reason."

Schaefer let go, pushed him away. But then he said, his voice much quieter, "You're a boy. You shouldn't be here. You shouldn't be out there until you have enough sense to protect yourself. With your attitude, there's no way you'll be alive for more than a few days."

These last words sank in. Dieter sat down on his cot. He didn't want to pay any attention to Schaefer, but the picture of his mother came to mind again. He saw her, that last day before he had left home, crying and begging him to be careful. He did want to see her again, did want to see his farm.

"Have you ever had a woman?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"It's none of your business what I've done. I've done plenty, that's for sure."

"You haven't. You don't know anything. You haven't seen anything. All you know is what you've been filled up with in Hitler Youth. You need to survive this, go home, have a wife, a nice long life." Schaefer sat down on his cot, across from Dieter, and looked at him. "Hedrick, if you don't drop when I tell you to drop, I'll knock you down. It doesn't matter whether I come back or not, but if I can do anything about it, you will. I see you boys—this whole generation—dying, dying for nothing, and it breaks my heart."

Behind Schaefer's anger was another tone: weariness, perhaps, but also affection. It confused Dieter. He didn't want to let someone like this make him forget everything he had learned. The man was wrong. He had lost sight of the purpose of this war. It didn't matter that he was a nice man, in his own way; he was still dangerous.

Dieter didn't sleep well that night. He wasn't sure, in fact, that he slept at all. He gave speeches

to himself, told himself what he believed, what he stood for, what he was willing to die for. But he also saw images: saw his friend Ernst Gessel, when his body had been torn open; saw Willi Hofmann, with his neck ripped into shreds, remembered the gurgling sounds in his throat. He kept wondering what he would see in the morning. He didn't want to be foolish; Schaefer was not entirely wrong about that. But better to be foolish than spineless. He would rather die than discover that he was a coward.

All was black the next morning, December 16, when the tanks began to roll. Dieter listened to them squeak and rattle as they crawled over the old wooden bridge, an echo reverberating from underneath. The Americans had to hear that. Dieter suspected that the reaction would be almost immediate. But the tanks rolled on and on, dozens of them, and then Dieter's battalion began to move. Two companies marched across the bridge ahead of Dieter's Third Company. But nothing happened, no gunfire, no artillery. Maybe this was going to be easier than Dieter had thought.

By the time Dieter crossed the bridge, daylight

was coming on, the gray of heavy clouds showing a haze of light, nothing more. But Dieter was glad to be marching, the movement warming his body and settling his nerves a little. It was another hour before he heard the first sound of battle. Tanks had begun to fire their big guns, and the *zwoop* of mortar fire was in the air. It was all far ahead, however, and it quieted after a time. Dieter's company kept up the hard march.

"The *Amis* must be clearing out. They don't want to face our Tiger Tanks," one of the men said, and some of the others laughed. It was what everyone wanted to believe, and to Dieter it made sense. In Hitler Youth, he had heard it a thousand times. The Americans were not committed to this war. They were in no danger from a war in Europe. Their only real quarrel was with the Japanese, who had attacked them. Besides, Americans were soft people, who had always had life too easy. They would turn and run when they faced a true threat.

Dieter heard a whizzing, windy sound in the air before he heard the pop of the machine gun itself. He stopped dead, looked about, and then suddenly he was on the ground. Schaefer had slammed an arm across his knees and driven

him down. But it had all sounded so harmless, like mosquitoes in the air.

What followed was something new. He heard something sucking air—a high-pitched, whooshing sound. He knew only an instant before it hit that he was hearing artillery, close, for the first time in his life. It was up ahead, but when it slammed into the earth, the ground trembled, and then a shock wave rolled over Dieter, slamming into his steel helmet. He ducked his head, held on as the rain of shells continued. There was a fury in it, the shells slamming one after another, the pull of air drawing the breath from his chest. He hadn't been prepared for this; no one had told him how loud it would be, how powerful. For five minutes the ground shook, the air pulsed, and dirt and debris scattered over him. And then it all stopped. But the popping of a machine gun kept up, the whipping noises in the air.

"Schaefer," the squad leader, Sergeant Franke, called, "take the men in your patrol. Work your way around that hill. Get rid of that machine-gun emplacement."

Schaefer cursed softly, but then he said, "All right, follow me. One at a time. Run low, and

make it to that brush just beyond the road." Then he turned and said, "Dieter, you go with me. Run when I run."

"I'm all right. I can—"

"You heard me. Run with me. Now!" And then he was up. Dieter jumped up and ran with him. The machine-gun fire was aimed farther up the road, more to the west. Dieter could hear nothing coming his way.

The other three men in the patrol followed, one at a time, and then Schaefer made another run to a place where a wedge of rock jutted out from a hillside. They made two more short runs, and still no fire came their way, but this time Schaefer said, "We crawl now."

Schaefer led out, and he did as he had instructed the others. He stayed flat on his stomach with his rifle resting in the crooks of his arms. He worked his way up the hillside, moving slowly, stopping to listen and watch. There was brush along the side of the hill and little groves of trees. Dieter could still hear the machine gun, but he couldn't see exactly where it was. As he and Schaefer came out from behind a little outcrop of rocks, he finally saw the muzzle fire. It was still a hundred meters

ahead, maybe more, toward the top of the hill. "Fitzmann," Schaefer whispered, "take Berger and go on ahead. We'll move up behind you and be ready to cover if they spot you. Get in as close as you can, and then throw grenades into that emplacement."

The men said nothing. They crawled on ahead. Schaefer moved up, too, but not as fast. He kept watching, ready to provide cover. He and Dieter and the other men had cut the distance in half, however, when Fitzmann and Berger tossed their first grenades. Dieter saw their arms make the flinging motion, saw the long-handled grenades flop through the air, and saw the explosions. He jumped up, ready to cover his men. But Schaefer had hold of Dieter's pant leg, and he jerked him down again. The fire had suddenly turned, was coming their way. Schaefer fired his machine pistol, laying down a hail of bullets, covering for his forward men. And then another grenade hit home, and this one silenced the gun.

Dieter had not yet fired, had forgotten to when the machine-gun fire had come at him. But now he aimed his rifle at the emplacement, and he saw a dark silhouette leap up. One of the Americans was hurrying up the hill behind the

gun. Dieter fired, pulled off three quick rounds, and the soldier disappeared. "I shot him, Schaefer. I shot him."

"Be quiet."

Schaefer waited for a time, but then he moved on up the hill, running in short bursts again. When they reached the gun, Fitzmann and Berger were already there. "They're finished," Berger said. "These two are dead. One ran off, but I think he went down, too."

"I shot him," Dieter said. "I got my first American."

No one commented. "Let's get back to our company," Schaefer said. The men walked back down the hill, where Schaefer gave a quick report to the captain, and then the company moved ahead. The rest of the day was mostly quiet after that. The phalanx of soldiers kept driving ahead, straight down the road. The rumor was that the Americans had been routed and were running for their lives.

That night, as the cold deepened, and the men dug into the ground enough to get out of the wind, Dieter was still feeling powerful. He hadn't been frightened. He had done what he had to do, and he had killed an *Ami*—taken his first blood. That was something to remember.

But as things quieted, he found himself less at ease than he wanted to be. A thought kept flitting into his head: Who was the man he had killed? What sort of fellow was he? But that was war, he told himself. He couldn't, absolutely wouldn't, trouble himself about it. He asked Schaefer, "What do you think of my shooting now? I'm not quite as green as you thought?"

"Don't make yourself so important. Not yet. You don't know what it will be like."

"We took some pretty good fire today, and you didn't see me quivering and crying."

"Just be quiet."

"All right, fine. But I will say this. Hitler's made a brilliant move. We're cutting through the Americans like a hot knife through butter."

"Hedrick," Schaefer said, "you haven't seen anything yet, so keep your mouth shut. The Americans have more men, more equipment, more airplanes—more of everything. We caught them by surprise today, but when they get organized, look out."

"What kind of talk is that? Why do you always expect the worst? You should—"

"I told you to be quiet, Hedrick. I mean it."