

A Short Story

Feature Page

By G. R. Fisher

MOTIVE FOR DARING

Rain fell in lank streams over the flat Dutch countryside which was now becoming faintly visible to the tired eyes that peered through the mist from the hedges around a shuttered farmhouse.

In the point of the defensive triangle around the crossroad Lieutenant Len Mackie, 8 platoon commander, fought a weariness as great as that of the men of his platoon.

"Nine days of this damned rain—nine days of staring at flat, wet greenness—probably nineteen more—seventeen hours sleep—today maybe I'll get a couple more—fifteen minutes to stand-down—God! A smoke would go good—nine days defensive occupation of a bloody mud plastered crossroads—nine days of this damned rain."

As he thought his eyes strayed to the face of his watch where the red sweep hand seemed to limp around an interminable circle. Eternity itself seemed no longer than the eleven minutes which had yet to creep away before the dawn "stand-to" would finish.

Finally Mackie glanced down again, rose, stretched, said to the hunched, unmoving figure in the slit trench beside him, "Alright sarge, stand-down, send six to fetch the breakfast, post two sentries per section and have the rest clean and oil weapons and ammo, I'll inspect at eight-thirty. Gotta match?"

"O. K., sir," answered sergeant Thom, producing a match, somehow still dry, and accepting the proffered cigarette, before he stamped off to carry out the order.

Mackie dragged the smoke deep into his lungs and as he did a voice cried, "Mr. Mackie! Mr. Mackie!" He turned and observed the lanky soldier who approached him at a dogged, shambling trot through the sticky muck.

"Yeh! What's wanted?" Mackie asked.

"The Colonel's up at H. Q., sir, and wants to see you."

"Hell! Alright, get back and tell him I'll be right there."

The soldier turned and shambling away as Len brushed some of the less adhesive mud from his trousers, buttoned the top of his hattie blouse, then shouted, "Take over, sarge!" Receiving Thom's acknowledging wave he turned and walked wearily toward the shell-battered red brick farmhouse that housed "A" Company headquarters.

A few minutes later Mackie entered the low-ceilinged kitchen, swept off his dripping roundsheet—cum-raincape and endeavoured to salute as smartly as possible the three men around the huge fireplace at the other end of the room. Lieutenant-Colonel J. R. Dykes, resplendent in freshly pressed, dry battle dress garrisoned with multi-colored ribbon on

the left breast returned the salute as Major Joey Brenton and "Specks" Taylor the intelligence officer called out, "Hi, Len!" and Brenton proffered a tin mug of steaming tea. Mackie gulped at it, welcoming its heat though it brought tears to his eyes.

"Well, Mackie," said J. R. Dykes his hand patting his elegantly clipped mustache, "I've got a little job for you."

Len groaned inwardly.

"As you know," continued Dykes, "it has long been my practice to dominate any enemy formations we face by the extensive use of patrols. In my considered opinion, it is only by incessant patrolling that we can be certain that cur—hum—sphere of influence, shall I say, extends right up to the enemy's forward positions. This I consider to be the fact of primary importance in this type of warfare. Accordingly I have planned another blow at Jerry's morale, scheduled for to-morrow night. You are to lead the patrol and, to ensure success, you will make a reconnaissance of their positions to-night. Taylor will give you the details as I explained them to him."

When Dykes finished Taylor beckoned Mackie over to the low table where a map was spread. His long fingers indicated a dot on the map, "Here is the farm known as Anna Hof," he said, "and along this track Jerry has a company position. Anna Hof is used as an observation post by day and is, we think, unoccupied by night. Now to-morrow night you'll take a platoon patrol into that area and take at least one prisoner. To-night you and two of your N. C. O.'s will have to receive your approach and the grounds of Anna Hof. Colonel Dykes suggests you approach by this ledge and then down this track. It's now eight o'clock you'd better skip back to your platoon for a while then I'll pick you up at nine for an on the ground once over from D Company's area. O. K." "O. K., Specks," Len answered as his hope of sleep that day grew fainter.

Back at his platoon position, over a breakfast of two shriveled sausages and a large chunk of bread and margarine washed down by gray tea Len considered the two nights ahead without enthusiasm. "Five hour jobs, both of 'em!" he muttered, "and no sleep either night. Well, I suppose its got to be done."

He swallowed the last of the bread and drained the tea mug, then with hurried movements he produced shaving kit from a canvas knapsack. With hurried strokes he cut off the most part of his bristly beard, using the same tin that had contained the sausages thus combining the chores of dish-washing and shaving.

This completed he walked slowly around the platoon curiously examining the newly oiled weapons and ammunition. To Thom he said, "Tell Corporals Rance and Salter to stand by for a patrol tonight. Tell 'em to get what sleep they can and that I'll brief 'em when I get back from my recon." Then he walked off as he saw Taylor's jeep pull up in front of the company headquarters.

In 8 platoon the monotonous round of slit-trench life went on with its (Continued on Column Four)

Poetry

We are pleased to publish the first of a series of undergraduate poems to be carried on this page until some future time when perhaps the poetry will miss the deadline—

LIFE IS A BOTTLE

(to the bookworm) Life, my dear friend, is a bottle, You drain it and throw it away. So take up a pint or a pottle And drink it while yet it is day.

The night like a tiger advances, And leaves naught but death in its wake.

So go to the parties and dances, For someday the bottle may break.

A. R. D. '50

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hourly change of sentries, its snatch-ed minutes of uneasy sleep, the continuous splat of the falling rain. At noon a lurch of lumps of pale-yellow cheese, running jam and indeterminate flavour thick slices of bread and the usual gray tea tasting strongly of calcium chloride, was served out by the men who had fetched it from the Company cook-house a mile and a half down the road. Men slept fitfully or talked in weary monotonous or scrawled letters in the shelter of half-boarded over slit-trenches.

At three o'clock Mackie returned and summoned Rance and Salter to him. Carefully he spread a map and tensely outlined the plan for the night. He finished with "Stand-to as usual at eight, we'll leave here at nine and pass through D company around ten." Any questions?

At a quarter past eleven that evening three figures moved silently along a dripping hedge through almost impenetrable blackness. The rain which had fallen steadily for over a week had ceased and here and there a watery star blinked fitfully from a turbulently clouded sky. To the north flickering flashes lit up the horizon and a sullen muttering of distant artillery payed undertones to the dripping and rusting of the hedge.

About a half-hour before the patrol had left D Companies forward posts and now were within a hundred yards of Anna Hof. They were clad alike in khaki sweaters, battle-trousers, rubber soled shoes, each had soot daubed on his face to break the highlights and a knitted balaclava helmet rolled on his head Mackie held a Sten machine-carbine in his left hand, his right cautiously testing each step before his foot advanced, for the danger of trip-wires attached to flares or to high explosive was always present. Salter followed a foot or two behind, a Bren machine-gun cradled in his arms. Back of him Salter carried another Sten and two spare magazines for the Bren. Each was the veteran of a score of similar night prowls and of seven or eight major actions yet each had still the emptiness of stomach and the nervous tension that had gone with his first combat experience. Thinking back Len Mackie had remembered a similar feeling before an important football game during his high school days.

Cautiously they crept along in a half crouch, pausing every step or two to peer and listen. Muscles stiffened by days of dampness protested the cramped position and only the sense of a lurking unknown kept senses at a high pitch and warned off fatigue. After what seemed like an hour the patrol came suddenly to a corner where the hedge turned and ran obliquely off to their left. They lay still while Mackie peered intently through the wet leaves. In a few minutes he distinguished, slightly to his right, a denser splotch of blackness. "Anna Hof," he said, silently. He strained his ears and peered even more intently through the gloom. At length, satisfied, he turned, touched Salter lightly on the head, then started off along the new hedge they'd encountered. Salter and Rance followed.

About ten yards further on a gap appeared. Mackie felt carefully through it with his hand, found no wire, crawled through and found himself, by sense of touch on a track

of squidgy mire. Suddenly he tensed. From down the track came splashing sounds and then a voice in sudden, swift speech.

Mackie shrank back toward the hedge and touched Salter who relayed the signal back to Rance. All three lay still and listened. The splashing sounds were nearer now and there was the cank of metal on metal. An idea leaped to life in Mackie's mind. He placed his mouth close to Salter's ear and whispered, "Sater did likewise to Rance then they lay still, pressing fat into the mud."

A minute later two dark forms were silhouetted above the silent three, another followed, then another, seven in all. As the seventh passed Mackie rose behind him, Salter's Bren and Rance's Sten roared into life, Mackie's raised Sten descended behind the ear of the man ahead and that man fell sideways into Mackie's arms. Quickly Len pulled him through the gap, the Bren and Sten hammered a final burst then Rance and Salter ducked through. Mackie swung the unconscious prisoner to his shoulders and they started off along the hedge by which they'd come.

Behind them was confusion. Caught at close range by two automatic weapons three men fell, the remaining fled into the field on the other side of the road. Two hundred yards away, in the position from which these men had come, there were shouted questions, conflicting orders, sleeping men woke hurriedly, and, since no one knew the strength or direction of the attack, men fired blindly in all directions. It was twenty minutes before order could be restored and a patrol sent out in the direction of the disturbance and another half hour before it returned to report only that three bodies lay in the road and no sign of a vanished enemy save spent cartridge cases in the mud.

By that time Mackie and his patrol, bearing their prisoner were nearing the safety of "D" company's lines. Another hour went by and they reached "A" Company to find Colonel Dykes and "Specks" Taylor waiting with Joey Brenton. Mackie reported in brief sentences, his weariness flooding back now that immediate danger no longer threatened. Then he leaned back, lit a cigarette and smoked avidly. Through his tiredness he heard snatches of pompous phrases from Dykes: "great honour... traditions of the regiment... maintenance of domination... indomitable fortitude... mention in despatches."

After a lengthy while Dykes stopped and Mackie murmured, "Thank you, sir."

Later, when Dykes and Taylor had gone off in their staff car with the prisoner, Rance and Salter liberally treated with issue rum and sent back to the platoon. Brenton looked quizzically at Len and asked, "What happened, Len? I've never known you to go in for that sort of heroic stuff before though you've turned in plenty of good jobs."

"Foolishness wasn't it, Joey? But it came off so, as I hoped, the platoon doesn't have to go out to-night. I'm dead beat so are the guys! When I saw the chance to finish it in one night, I took it and it worked. G'night, now I'm going to sleep!"

"Yeh, but don't forget, stand-to at five!"

MUTUAL LIFE OF CANADA

REPRESENTED BY

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