

There's a drum rhythm to the endless sloshing and splashing sounds of the troops patrolling their stations. Waiting. You know the best thing about waiting? It doesn't involve dying.



# Battalion! Battalion!

David Woodruff © 2019

---

I could hardly stand the wind was blowing so hard. For my money, there's nothing worse than wind. I'm happy to stand in snow and rain up to my eyeballs, but the wind is another matter. It goes right through you. You can't sleep with the wind screaming either. You can't keep a blanket on top of you and if you're in a tent, it's even worse. All you hear is the tent material flapping ... when it isn't falling over on you.

On top of the wind, it's raining. So, now I'm standing in the wind and I'm wet. Me and a hundred other goblins of Fromm's Detachment. No goblin ever goes out on his own. Even if you tried it, you'd be followed by maybe two dozen or more. It's one of the serious group fears of my people, they might miss out on some glory. So much so, the cry "wait for me," is heard more often than "hello."

The air was permeated with the smell of wet pine needles. I hate the sticky-sweet smell. It hangs in your clothes and you can't get it out, no matter how much frog spittle you rub on your pants. As I march around to keep warm, I can feel the water from the puddles getting between my toes. There's a drum rhythm to the endless sloshing and splashing sounds of the troops patrolling their stations. Waiting. You know the best thing about waiting? It doesn't involve dying.

Our detachment was sent out to watch for the arrival of Sigurd Olufsen of the Danes, one of the captains of Ragnar Lothbrok. His arrival was foretold by the brothers Simon and Nick our seers. Sigurd was seeking fame to surpass his master ... and you shouldn't be surprised by this, our loot. Now, you would think, even with our numbers a group of three-foot-tall creatures with large, misshapen heads would be at a slight disadvantage. You'd be wrong. We are, in fact, truly and completely screwed. But we do have a few tricks up our collective sleeves. We plan to sell ourselves dearly.

Gareth's the name. I command the right wing because I am the oldest. By a full three months. By goblin standards, it makes me venerable. Only Fromm is older, a whole six years of age. For a goblin who commonly only makes it to four and a half, it's rightly respectable. Like me, Fromm lost his brother early on. We're all born as twins you know. It's nice to have someone to share everything with. Owen was a great brood brother. I hold High Command responsible for my brother Owen's death. Someone had a really stupid idea. Since we were so small, we should have elephants. One of the big gray beasts crushed Owen flatter than a moldy leaf. But it turned out OK in the end. Elephants make good eating, especially slow roasted over an open fire.

If you think the elephants were dumb, you should have seen the 1<sup>st</sup> Crocodile Cavalry Corps. Another moron got the bright idea you shouldn't feed the critters before a battle. This was based on the brilliant observation that after you feed a croc, it tended to go to sleep. Not your best posture for a beast you intend to ride into battle. The first time the commander yelled charge, the crocs rolled over, threw off their riders and ate them. Our detachment lost Gene and Richard in a single gulp. Us goblins are social types, we don't like to hang around by ourselves. Do you know any fierce animals which wouldn't mind being ridden by a goblin?

We've been here for two days now. Fromm set us up on a hill overlooking the coast. The sad part is where there weren't trees, there are jagged rocks. Moss covered granite shards all over the place. This means no tents. There's no place to set them up. Fromm thinks making the Northmen climb between the rocks will give us an advantage. Personally, I'd rather have the crocs.

Of course, it's not lonely up here in the drizzle and the rain, especially for me. I can truly say I don't miss Owen at all. Mostly because he nags me every day. Yes, I talk to my dead brother. Actually, I talk to all my deceased relatives. There's no way out of it. I'm a Ghostwalker. Every goblin has a special skill. Talking to the dead is mine. You wanna trade? It's a pretty miserable talent. Take my mother, for example, she's always hanging around telling me I should have shoes on my feet.

Every time I steal a pair of shoes, they are either too big and I can't keep my feet in them or they pinch my ankles. I had a nice pair of boots once until Lou and Bud stole them. Lou still wears the right one and Bud the left. The sea's starting to pick up now. You can hear the crashing of the waves up here. There's a nice juicy fog starting to roll in. I like how a nice fog can make you feel all cold and damp. Me dad was a good one for enjoying a dense fog. Believe me, he just told me. Which is an unusual comment for him, because he's always telling me how he should have stabbed me mother earlier. But then me dad was always going around stabbing people. Although it's important to pick the right people. Dad learned this lesson a bit too late.

We all hear the screams from Stan and Oliver. Fromm had them climb a tree. Stan was yelling how he could see the red and white stripes of their sails. Then they had a disagreement relating to the number of ships. Stan was counting them one way and Oliver the other. They couldn't agree by a factor of four. A slap fight ensued. Which only ended when they fell out of the tree. Fortunately, Martin and Lewis were there to break their fall.

Fromm had us all line up at the top of the hill, our long spears pointed down the rocky slope.

"We'll let the damn Orcs come to us!" Fromm shouted.

"They're Danes, sir," Gene told him, as Richard stood shaking his head.

Fromm tried to grind his teeth, but they were long ago worn down to nubs. So, it merely made him drool. "Danes, Orcs it's all the same. You stick'em in the belly and listen to'em scream."

We stood attention at the top of the hill, while the Danes got off their ships and got organized. You'd think this would be a good time to rush 'em. Charging down the hill to impale them upon our spears before they got a chance to sort things out. What are you thinking? I said Fromm was old, I didn't say he was smart. As the Northmen readied their shields, the other twelve detachments of goblins came marching up. At first, we could smell them. Only later could we hear them behind us, slogging in the mud and puddles. Now the whole battalion was here. 5,000 mean and green goblins, all ready to die for their brothers.

The Northmen were forming their shield wall now. Three rows of brightly painted wooden circles. Stupid morons didn't know how to make squares. You know, the nice circles with the four pointy bits added on in the corners. We could hardly see the Danes hiding behind their round, timber walls. You wouldn't catch a goblin hiding behind a wooden wall. Besides, you know how hard it is to chop down a tree to make those things when you're only three feet tall?

We could hear them coming. "Step, step, step ..." one of them yelled as they slowly advanced their line in unison up the hill. Stupid jerks. Way to tell us what they are planning to do. The wall loomed larger as they approached and we all tightened our spear grip. We stood proudly, a wall of spears, eight deep.

Lou and Bud were bringing up the siege engines. Dan and John had the honor of being the first to go in battle.

The two brothers jumped into a big barrel of pitch. They crawled out all covered in black and lit themselves on fire. Dan and John climbed into the catapult buckets and the order was given to fire. Both Dan and John screamed at the top of their lungs as they flew in the air. Their arc resembled the tails of burning comets. Their crusty swords were pointed forward as they slammed into the Danes, backing up their shield wall. Goblins don't burn well, so they immediately began running around jamming their trusty swords into the backs of the Danes legs.

More bright flames shot across the sky. Most of them made it, except for Eric and Ernie who got caught up in the trees. We could hear the screams and yells of the Danes and our brothers behind the shield wall. Then we heard the snicker-snack of the Danish axes. Goblins don't burn well, but they tend to react poorly to cold steel. In a few minutes, it was silent again.

Until we hear, "Step, step, step ..."

Owen jumped up on the point of my spear and started screaming. I had to shake him off. Can't really see your target well with a partially translucent spirit jumping up and down on the end. It also didn't help my spear form any with uncle Smedley yelling "Stick'em" in my ear the whole time.

The Northmen howled. "Step, step, step ..."

Fromm blew the horn. Time to bring out the big guns. Martin and Lewis led the creature up to the front, pulling on the reins. Now, Egon was big ... the word huge comes to mind as an understatement. He could have swallowed one of our elephants without bothering to chew. The battalion had been training him for years. Every so often two of the brothers would walk down its throat, right into its belly. You got to admire a race which is willing to feed their guests with – themselves." Egon tended to like it if they wore some barbeque sauce on the tops of their bald heads.

As he got closer to the crest, Egon could see the line of the Danes marching up the rocky slope. He shook his big horny head from side to side and snorted.

"Step, step, step ..."

Egon didn't see the wall as we did. He saw them as someone else trying to eat his lunch. Martin and Lewis dropped the reins as it started to flap its wings. The motion was slow at first, kicking up the water into a fine spray and sending pine needles flying every which way. Eventually, Egon lifted into the air. It made a pass over the Danish line and then circled around, approaching the Northmen a second time.

On this pass, he opened his mouth, displaying his razor-sharp teeth, each one larger than any one of us. Flames spewed from the dragon's mouth, pouring fiery death on the line of advancing humans. What followed were the screams and yells of the roasted Danes. Almost all of them dropped their burning shields. The line of burning wood made brilliant campfires which illuminated the Northmen's heavy fur coats and thick leather armor.

Egon rose high in the sky and then turned his nose gracefully toward the ground. Fire and flame licked the ground as he made his third pass, scorching the Danish line. Burning flesh fell from the bones of

limbs caught in Egon's mighty breath. With this latest attack, the line broke and those not already consumed in flame ran back in panic toward their ships.

Fromm pounded the ground with the butt of his spear. "Battalion!" he yelled. Each one of us raised our spears and snapped to attention with an audible click as we saluted Great Egon the Mighty. Ragnar Lothbrok was going to need a new captain.