



NIGHT TERRORS

The View from the Other Side

April 1942. For the second time in a year British Commonwealth forces sat outside the tiny town of Tobruk, Libya surrounded on three sides by a German army desperate to get in. Their tired eyes kept a close watch on the desert, hoping for a miracle.

©2020 David Woodruff – all rights reserved

The heat was oppressive. Standing around you felt like you were being toasted in an oven. Thank God he wasn't in a tank. Despite the extra protection, you could die just from the desert heat. For a moment he thought about the regular residents of Tobruk and he couldn't even imagine living here. Curt Watkins had seen more sand and dust than he had ever wanted to see.

"Sergeant, what's the situation here?" the captain enquired. The captain had been a last-minute replacement from Blighty as their own officer had been killed in the fighting the week before. He had no experience with the Australians he was now commanding. Curt hated him instantly, without even remembering his name. The officer's uniform was clean and pressed without the ever-present rings under the armpits.

Never-the-less, Curt stood to attention and gave the officer a snappy salute. "No activity sir. It looks quiet."

The officer looked through the ranging periscope out across the empty expanse of desert. Under any other circumstances Curt might have taken offense, but he was used to being disbelieved. Curt took it in stride. "Yes, well..." the captained saluted with his swagger stick. "Keep a good lookout in any case."

"Yes, sir."

Spinning on his heels the officer walked away, back to his comfortable billet, no doubt. In a rush of schoolboy fervor, Curt imagined shooting a spitball at the officer's back as he withdrew. Lucky for the captain there wasn't enough liquid in this desert hole to make a spitball.

"What do you really think is going on?" private Curry asked.

The sergeant took a look through the periscope. "I don't think we have to worry about the Germans. I think the sand will swallow us up without them having to lift a finger."

There was a smell of oil and smoke in the air. The private took a swig from his canteen. Even the water in this place tasted like oil. "Don't drink too much water," the sergeant barked. "We won't be able to get any more water here until tonight."

"Maybe we can go out there and shoot some of the Jerry's up and take there's"

"Nothing would give me more pleasure," the sergeant offered, "but we've got orders. No unnecessary risks."

Curt had a difficult time deciding who he hated more, the British for taking him this far from home or the damn Germans for making it all happen. Here he was halfway across the world went the Japanese were breathing down the necks of his neighbors back at home. If his resentment was water, it would be raining buckets right now. He'd never even gotten a chance to volunteer... the government came and got him. They'd driven out in trucks to the farm and taken him and anyone else they could find. He'd barely had the opportunity to wave goodbye to his wife.

He watched the sun go down, but unlike the others, it didn't remind him of home. The air was much too stale. Curt settled down in the trench. Best to find a warm spot in the sand before the sun went down. It'd be cold soon; shivering, teeth clatteringly clod. Sleep came like a wave.

He awoke with a start. Someone was standing over him. Curt panicked when he saw the German uniform and reached for his gun. The man stopped him. "Simmer down," the corporal told him, "They want you in the command tent."

The sound of English relaxed him a bit, but he was still on edge. He picked up his weapon, but instead of his hands wrapping themselves around his trusty sten gun, he found them on the greasy surface of a German MP-40. Curt rose to his feet to see what was going on. He caught his reflection in a small shaving mirror. It was him alright. Maybe with a little more stubble on his face, but he clearly recognized himself. Only he wasn't in his usual attire, he was wearing an Africa Corps uniform.

The corporal grabbed him by the arm. "Kurt, what's wrong with you? They want you in the command tent. It wasn't a request."

Now the combination of Jerry uniforms and English was beginning to disturb him. Had he been on some type of mission? Had they found him out? Discovered he wasn't a German? Curt decided something else must be going on. You don't just let prisoners, or a spy, walk around with a gun in their hands.

He stumbled out into the sand. For a moment he was distracted by some lice who attempted to make a meal of his wrist. He brushed them off, although they left a nice red welt at their dinner table. Everywhere he looked he saw a sea of Jerry uniforms. Fortunately, the corporal led the way. Inside the tent, everything was illuminated with oil lamps. The place smelled like kerosene, soot, and violence. German officers stood gathered around a map table. "Ah sergeant, you're finally here. Good." He pointed at a section of the map. Curt recognized it at once, it was the section of the line where he and his men were huddled. "Tomorrow night, I want you and your men to fall in behind a platoon of tanks. Overflights show there are no anti-tanks guns in this sector, we're going to smash through and head for the town before they have a chance to respond. Your job is to mop up any resistance and to hold the flanks. Is that clear?"

Curt nodded, but he didn't have any idea why. His instinct was to gun everyone down in the room and run for it. But his brain informed him he didn't have a chance. Mostly because he didn't have any experience with the German MP-40. He wasn't even sure how to take the safety off.

The officer raised one eyebrow and gave him a look. "Any questions?"

Curt had a thousand questions, but he kept a stranglehold on his mouth. He shook his head.

"Good," the officer replied in a familiar tone, "Kurt make sure you do a good job here. We don't want any surprises. We aren't looking for any prisoners, so if you have to... you know what to do."

Fortunately, they didn't require him to say anything. Kurt didn't know any more than a few words in German. Just what he learned from watching the flickers. The Jerry officers went back to discussing things, ignoring even his presence inside the tent. Once again, the corporal pulled him by the arm, yanking him back through the tent flap. "You'd better go back to sleep, Kurt. We'll go over things in the morning."

"Fine," Curt muttered. He swallowed. He expected all sorts of attention after giving himself away and speaking in English, but nothing happened. The corporal simply put him back where he's started this

nightmare and covered him with a blanket. Curl lay there quietly waiting for the corporal to leave so he could escape. But the man stayed by his side and without meaning to do so, Curt fell asleep.

He awoke in the cold morning air, but it was rapidly heating up. At his side was his trusty sten gun. Checking his sleeves, he found himself back in his old commonwealth uniform. Worn though it was, it was a pleasure to have on. Even the lice felt welcome. Although Curt could never come to an understanding of how the lice and the flies could weather the dry hot climate. Thank God, it had all been a stupid dream.

He froze in his tracks. There, just above his hand, was the red welt left by the lice who had bitten him the previous night. Lice don't bite you in your dreams... and they certainly didn't leave marks. He rushed up to the periscope. All he could see was dust, sand, and waves of heat rising in the desert. Not even the rolling tumbleweeds of the American westerns lived out here. It was a vast plain of desolation. The kind of place where it should be easy to spot an assembling enemy, but the heat waves were the perfect camouflage.

All morning long he tortured himself. Should he make a report? Two voices screamed in his head. One demanding action, the other telling him he was crackers... and if he made a report everyone would know it. In the end, he gave in and stormed off to battalion.

"Sir," Curt gave a smart salute. "Any news on bringing over an anti-tank gun?"

The captain was a know-it-all smart ass and he made no pretensions about it. "I've explained this to you before Sergeant Watkins, none are available. You'll just have to make do."

"With all due respect, sir. Our position is highly vulnerable. The land to the south is excellent tank country."

The captain gave him a crooked smile. "Well sergeant, I have no idea what they teach you in those backwoods schools you have in the outback, but in this part of the world... if there are none available it means you can't have any."

Curt exhaled heavily "Sir, I have reason to believe Jerry will make an attempt at our part of the line this evening."

"Nonsense," the captain snorted. "Intelligence reveals all his heavy equipment is off to the east. I don't think the Ities are going to be much of a threat. You can machine gun right through their tanks."

"Begging the captain's pardon, it's not quite as easy as he suggests."

The officer snarled. "Still it doesn't change the fact no guns are available and so you won't be getting any. Do I make myself clear?"

Curt swallowed hard. "Sir, I was in the German camp last night. I overheard their plans to send over a platoon of tanks tonight, sir."

The captain's shoulder drooped. "And how did you manage this sergeant?" His voice was full of disdain. "You speak German, do you?"

The sergeant's right hand began to shake. "No, sir."

“Look, sergeant, I understand how the heat can get at you out here. Make you see things. I’ll try to see if I can get you and your men rotated out of the line for a bit. Now get out of here before I have you up on charges.”

With a snappy salute, Curt withdrew. “Yes, Sir.” Disappointed, he was... as the captain had insisted... going to have to make do.

“Sergeant,” the captain interrupted his retreat, “Are you being shelled?”

Curt blinked in confusion, “No, sir.”

“Well, Jerry likes to lead off his attack with a bit of shelling. So, I think you can relax.”

“Yes, sir. As you say, sir.”

By nightfall, Curt was convinced he’d dreamed it all. The lice must have bitten him in the night and he’d just scratched it in his sleep. It must have been what he felt. All-day long he’d gazed across the way and seen no movement, not a sign the enemy was up to anything. Even after nightfall and there was any sign of anything, he kept watching. It didn’t take long before he began to think of himself as a fool. The captain may have been right. The sun out here was baking his brain. Making the imaginary appear to be real. The more he thought about it, the more ridiculous it felt. Wearing the Jerry uniform, the whole thing. He felt dumb... right up until he heard the sound of the tanks approaching.

The next few minutes were ones of unbridled confusion. Shells started dropping everywhere. The night sky lit up like it was daylight. Machine guns rumbled like the train tracks between Cooktown and Kimberley. Curt had worked in a steel plant in Brisbane which had been quieter.

With nothing to stop the Jerry tanks, they rolled over the trenches as if no one was home. But the problem wasn’t the tanks. It was the troops following them up, eating the panzer fumes. The fighting was sharp and intense, especially in the dark. Bright flashes of explosions revealed those dark empty spots in front of you were filled with the enemy. Both sides usually had the same shocked look on their faces.

“Sarge, you stay here and you’re going to get yourself killed,” Curry insisted.

Curt chuckled. “I’ve been dead before.”

“We need to get back to HQ. Tell them what is going on.” Curt barked. “I’m going to die on my feet or not at all.”

The fighting raged and the confusion of the dark reigned. Curt’s sten gun finally ran out, he had nothing left and he threw the useless metal into the bottom of the trench. He drew his pistol. The .38 had been Captain Pearce’s six-chamber special. His wife had given it to him before he left. Curt could hear boots in the trench behind him. They were either being reinforced he wouldn’t get a chance to get off all six rounds. In the dark, he couldn’t tell. He held up the pistol.

Overhead, someone must have shot off a flare. Shadows crossed the trench as the burning flare floated down on a parachute. Slowly the light crossed into the trench. Standing before him Curt could see a German. A German wearing his face, a luger pistol aimed directly at his head. It was like looking in a

mirror. Even the stubble was the same. The two stood there for a moment, their lives locked in a Mexican standoff as the light drifted across the trench.

Then he pulled the trigger.