In Line of Duty

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Abstract

LIEUTENANT COLE tore the end off the brown envelope and finished out the yellow message blank. He moved under the low, wooden, cellar beam where the gasoline lantern was suspended and began to read. “. . . send officer and party of 3 men . . .” he swore to himself. . . . "to act in lieu of artillery observer . . . in position by 1800 hours . . ."...
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LIEUTENANT COLE tore the end off the brown envelope and finished out the yellow message blank. He moved under the low, wooden, cellar beam where the gasoline lantern was suspended and began to read. "... send officer and party of 3 men ..." he swore to himself ... "to act in lieu of artillery observer ... in position by 1800 hours ..."

Damn! Did that mean he would have to send Lieutenant Spencer? Do you suppose someone at headquarters knows of Spencer's artillery background? Cole lifted his eyes and turned his head, searching into the darkness.

"Sergeant Carnes?"

"Yes, sir." An unenthusiastic voice came from near by and a tired young soldier rose from the box of C rations on which he had been sitting.

"Let's have that map a minute."

Carnes came into the circle of light carrying a transparent, plastic map case on which red and blue lines had been drawn with a grease pencil.

"No—here, take these coordinates." Cole paused, then proceeded anxiously, "Yoke 736 dash Love 284. See where that plots." Cole watched the sergeant a moment until he had located the proper grid square, then returned to the message.

Carnes scaled in both directions. Then he studied the map carefully for a moment.

"A church, sir."

Cole stopped reading. A church. A church steeple. The logical place from which to observe and direct artillery fire. And just as logical a place for the Germans to choose to shoot at to adjust their artillery fire. And now—send his closest friend, Lieutenant Spencer—into that steeple—as an observer for 24 hours. But there must be some mistake. The only church around is in front of the lines.

"Are you sure, sergeant?" Cole handed him a piece of tissue paper with penciled crosses on it in several places. "Here, check it with this overlay." Carnes adjusted it to the map and Cole bent down to look over the smaller man's shoulder.
"It's the same point again, sir. About 150 yards out in front of Able Company."

"I guess you're right, Carnes. That must have been the sector that was giving Able Company so much trouble this afternoon. I'm sure they had it once too."

Cole took the map and studied it. The church. He bit his lip. He remembered seeing the church that afternoon—its weathercock still perched on the steeple after everything else but a shaky skeleton had been shot away. He put the map down and fingered the yellow message blank. An observer would have to use that steeple to get any sort of a view. A hell of a place. Anyway, it wasn't the job for an infantryman, like Spencer. Where was the artillery observer? And then what about Able Company? It was in their sector. They had withdrawn. Could anyone force a man to treat the life of a friend so callously? Cole's eyes rested on the cold and impersonal scrawl at the bottom of the message—"Worth, Lt. Col."

Well, whoever went would have to take men from Lieutenant Spencer's platoon. Cole turned to the sergeant. "Send someone down to Sergeant Morgan. Tell him to have three men up here from the Second Platoon in half an hour, ready to man an observation post. An officer will go with them. I'll tell Lieutenant—uh, I'll find the officer and give him the instructions."

"Yes sir."

"Oh yes, and tell them to be prepared to stay 24 hours—at least."

Sergeant Carnes left and Cole sat down and rested his head in his hands. It's just a matter of 24 hours. Men do come back from such jobs. If they don't—Forget it! Remember how you used to argue with him? Did you mean it? It is true, isn't it, that a man in command really has no friends or enemies? What is the phrase they use? 'In line of duty?' Yes. In line of duty. Think of him now as you would consider the three men you are sending out with him. You don't even know their names. Forget his smiling, dark-eyed girl from St. Louis. You aren't concerned with pictures in other billfolds in the company. Why should any name or serial number on that roster, that continually changing roster, mean more than any other? Forget it, forget it. Forget it! . . .

Sergeant Carnes was somewhere in the dark of the cellar, shaking a man by the shoulders. The man rose slowly to his feet, but another still dozed on the dirt floor, his back against
the stone wall, his knees pulled in toward his chest, his head sagging forward. The first man picked up his rifle. He trudged to the blanket-draped doorway and started through. But he bumped squarely into Lieutenant Spencer who was pushing through from the other side of the blanket. The confusion at the doorway drew Cole away from his thoughts. He looked up to see Spencer helping the other man to his feet again.

"I swear, I should have expected something like this from you rear-echelon commandos," Spencer said derisively. He directed his comment to Cole, who was avoiding his eyes. "Boobytrapping the C. P. What next?" He stood just inside the doorway now, watching Cole, a bit surprised that his bantering had not been returned. Then in his soft Missouri drawl, "Well, 'Herr Hauptmann,' aren't you going to invite me in? I swear, if I didn't know you better, I'd think you were giving us the high hat."

Spencer has spoiled it all. "Herr Hauptmann," Spence had never called him that before. That was the epithet the two of them had for old Captain Bennett. Just Spence's way of showing you that he considers you no different after a week as Company Commander than you were as a platoon leader a week ago.

Cole met Spencer's eyes for the first time and smiled, trying to conceal his anguish. "Come on in, Spence," he said, "but I'm warning you to be careful or I'll have you up for insubordination." They both laughed a bit and Spencer came under the hard white glare of the gasoline lantern.

Spencer sat down heavily on a crate. "My men are in cellars for the night now, and the area is secured."

He removed his helmet and attempted to straighten his mussed hair with his fingers. Cole watched him unbutton his field jacket and pull it off. He liked to remember Spence as a young and spirited athlete, but there was no sparkle in his eyes now. They were dull from the lack of sleep and a total drain of energy and there were grey folds of skin under them. Cole saw the dark, heavy beard, the drab and cumbersome, long-sleeved sweater, the mud-stained wool trousers; but he remembered Spencer as a brash and carefree college boy in OCS and as a jaunty new officer in a trim uniform with bright gold bars.

"More poop for the troops?" asked Spencer, for he noticed the yellow message blank.

Now's the time. Tell him. He's asked for it. Give it to him
straight. Cole braced himself but when he looked up, Spencer was folding his field jacket into a pillow and had started to adjust himself on the floor, paying no attention to Cole.

"Another up-to-the-minute intelligence report, I reckon," Spencer said scornfully, answering his own question. "Well, if the Colonel wants any help from me," he said in jest, "wake me." Cole winced.

Spencer was asleep in a few minutes. Cole looked at him lying there on the floor and dropped a coat over him. Why shouldn't you go yourself? You don't take any chances. He was out there leading the attacking platoon all afternoon. Do you have the right to send him?—Take hold of yourself, Cole. Stop thinking like that. You're a company commander now, not a platoon leader. Your duty is here. But there are two other officers in the company.

The communication sergeant and his assistant were pulling some wires into the cellar, snapping handsets to them and using the "sound-power" telephone to establish communication with each platoon. In a short time, Cole had contact with the First Platoon.

"Everyone is set up for the night in cellars," reported Sergeant Wright. Wright was doing a fine job of handling the platoon alone now, that only last week they had shared. He couldn't send Wright though. There would be no one to take the platoon, but he really hadn't considered it seriously.

The Second Platoon? Spence had them lined up. They ought to be ready for anything though, as support platoon. Cole contacted the Weapons Platoon next.

"Lt. McKenna will be up to see you soon, sir. He's setting the machine guns up now to fire across the company front..."

"Yes, sir, the mortars are going in where you told him to put them."

Well, that eliminates McKenna. He can't very well leave the platoon when the defense of the company is built on those machine guns and mortars.

Cole whistled into the transmitter to call the Third Platoon. He had almost forgotten about Thompson. He glanced over at Spencer who was still sleeping soundly and smiled. Sergeant Howe answered.

"Lieutenant Thompson? No sir. He's gone. The medic
examined him after we got set up here, and sent him back to the aid station . . . .

"But it was a bad wound, sir. I'm sorry. I meant to call you about it as soon as I could."

The handset suddenly felt heavier. Cole's knees might have buckled, but he sat down. Now what? Short two officers. Another casualty today. An attack to "jump off" within 24 hours, and Battalion orders you to send Spencer, your only rifle platoon leader, off to man an observation post.

"Sergeant Carnes."

"Yes sir?"

"Do we have any contact with Able Company?"

"The radio, but I don't believe Jackson's been able to get it working."

"No wire yet?"

"No sir."

"Well then, get that radio operator busy and find out what is wrong and then get Battalion for me quick."

Cole felt slightly dizzy. He seemed to be resting on a layer of air and revolving with the entire cellar around the spot where Spencer lay sleeping.

The darkness of winter evening had been mounting gradually outside. Now, the blackness of the cellar entrance made an almost complete merger with muddy and dingy out of doors. Men moved about more freely outside but were extremely careful when passing through the blanket at the door to see that the light did not escape its small prison. Taking turns, the guards at the entrance stepped into the cellar to drag on a cigarette for a few minutes. Inside, Cole waited to hear from the radio operator. Spencer still slept.

You can't send Spence. He's part of you. You'd go crazy if it weren't for that bantering back and forth between the two of you. He's a brother. He gives you the cockiness you need. He speaks his mind and straightens you out occasionally. And he needs your help too. At least, you can furnish that steadiness that he needs.

"Carnes, what has Jackson been able to do with that radio?"

Cole inquired desperately.

"Nothing yet, sir."

The blanket pushed aside once more and Sergeant Morgan entered followed by the three men. Cole watched them file into
the musty cellar. Poor devils. That first fellow, his equipment looks new enough and clean enough for him to be new to the company. What is that again, "In line of duty—in line of duty a commander has no friends or foes." Well, there was not much more he could do now. But he did hate to disturb Spence. He would need all the rest he could get.

"Lt. Cole, Lt. Cole!"

Cole's thoughts were interrupted. It was Sergeant Carnes. Lieutenant Spencer was pushing himself up on his arms and looking about now.

"Yes?"

"Jackson has Battalion now. What do you want him to tell them?"

He stood there a moment undecided. "Tell them, uh, tell them, 'Message received. Will comply.' "

Cole turned to Morgan. "Sergeant, take these men into the cellar of the house behind this one and pick up a radio, rations and anything else and wait there."

Spencer was putting on his field jacket when Cole turned to him after the men had gone.

"Lieutenant Spencer," Cole said, trying with difficulty to make the words flow naturally, "you, uh, you will take three men with you to this church," and he indicated it on the map, "and uh, set up an O.P. and direct fire for the artillery."

He handed Spencer the message to read. Cole's lips trembled slightly, but he continued, "You will be there for, uh, at least 24 hours. Better pick up everything you think you'll need. Get a map from Sergeant Carnes. Your men are waiting outside."

He paused and looked at Spencer. Spencer looked up from reading the message. For several seconds they stood there in silence. It's all so unreal. Too much like a bad dream. Spence knows what he's up against. Why does he have to make it so hard for me? Say something. Maybe he's waiting for me.

Cole opened his mouth, hesitated, then said, "You, uh, you shouldn't find it too hard. Uh, are there any questions?" He stared at his feet for a moment and then looked up. Spencer swallowed hard.

"No sir," he said. Spencer waited a moment. Then he put on his helmet, moved through the doorway and was swallowed by the night. Cole started to follow but stopped himself, turned around and plodded back to sit on a box under the light and wait.